

FUTURE

anime

12

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ALL THINGS ANIME | SUMMER 2008

**SIZZLING
POSTERS
INSIDE!**

**GURREN
LAGANN**

Robots and rifles and
beastmen! Oh, my!

HOW TO SPEAK
LIKE AN OTAKU! p. 72

**BEST
ANIME
NOW!**

11

**INCREDIBLE
FEATURES**

CODE GEASS

TSUBASA

LUCKY STAR

ARIA

BLEACH

EMMA

DEVIL MAY CRY

SUMMER READING

133

ESSENTIAL MANGA
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LAN Primer

What is a LAN?

If you have never been to a LAN party before, the idea of packing up your computer, driving hours to get there can sound daunting. But that is only if you have never been to a large-scale LAN party. LAN parties with several hundred gamers are action-packed weekends with huge contests, great tournaments, and loads of prizes for attendees. People come in groups, while some people come by themselves – either way you leave with more friends than you came with. Some come to show off their awesome case mod, some to show off their skills, and some come just for time away from the normal grind of life to do what they love most – game. Most will find that once they have been to a large LAN party, they are caught up craving more and waiting for the next one to come to their region.

What is Showdown LAN?

Showdown LAN, presented by PC Gamer and Maximum PC magazines, parties with 500 computer gamers that come from all over the United States and Canada, to game for three days straight. Although Showdown has contests and prize giveaways, we pride ourselves in not being just another professional tournament. It's a LAN that caters to the everyday gamer. Showdown is about playing the games you love, loads of contests, meeting friends, and most importantly, having fun.



Because the **Andersons**

play video games, there's a system in place

to make sure they

bring home the right ones. This is how that system

works: First, Mom and Dad select games using the ratings on the box. Next,

everyone gets a controller. Finally, the **kids win.** This quality time is presented by the **ESRB.**



Summer 08

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GamesRadar.com Top 7...

Bad guys you didn't want to kill

The gaming murders that left a bad taste in our mouths



The Colossi

Shadow of the Colossus

Most of these huge beasts are just minding their own business and only attack once provoked. Colossus 13 doesn't even retaliate, instead merely attempting to shake you off. They clearly feel pain too - stab them in the head and you'll know about it. Come on, one of them's even got a cool beard, yet you still killed it, didn't you? It's dead now. You did it. Shame on you.

Wanna read more?

- Stereotypical gamers we hate
- Gaming nudity you didn't notice
- Secret shame games

Head to:

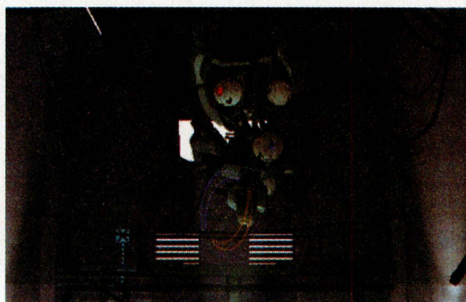
gamesradar.com/top7



Goombas

Super Mario Bros.

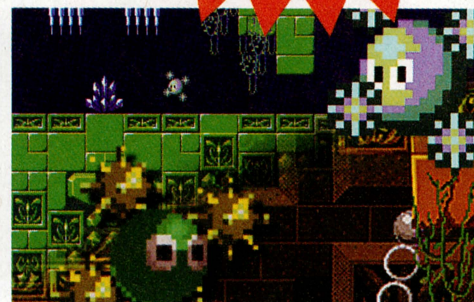
If you stand still and they hit you, you die, but then that's true of buses and you don't go around stamping on them. You only get 100 points per kill too - the gaming equivalent of a \$5.00 whole chicken. Has life really become so discounted?



GLaDOS

Portal

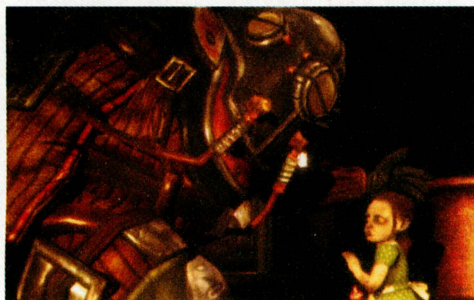
Just as hostages can come to bond with their captors, so you end up liking GLaDOS - the female-voiced computer in Portal, the Best Game Ever Made (TM). Guilt for killing her is prolonged because you have to do it a piece at a time. While she talks to you. (Sniff.)



Orbinaut

Sonic the Hedgehog

After these critters toss their spikes they're just cute, marshmallowy-looking creatures that just stare and slowly move forwards. They're now totally harmless. Are you really such a bastard that you'd kill them? Yep, us too. But we felt dirty afterwards.



Big Daddies

BioShock

They're huge, ugly, armed with a massive drill and turn violent with only the smallest provocation, but the Big Daddies still make us sad when they die. They're only protecting their Little Sister after all. 'Wake up, Mr Bubbles?' Sorry, ain't gonna happen.



Spotty Bulorb

Pikmin

This is the angry mob lynching of gaming, The Spotty Bulorb is surrounded in its sleep, worn down and then killed. While its children watch! Or maybe you killed them first? OK, so it's just like nature. But nature can be so cruel.



Level 1

Pokemon

You've been playing for ages and you run into a low-level Pokemon. That's when you realise your super-powered team of fighters has become a remorseless unit. What chance does a level 2 Pidgey have against your level 67 Glaceon?

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EDITOR'S NOTE



A funny thing happened to anime fans sometime around the middle of 2005: They stopped buying anime. Oh, sure, anime was still sold in retail outlets all around the States—and someone was still purchasing all those DVDs. But hardcore fans? They kinda quit paying for privilege of consuming their favorite form of entertainment. Perhaps it's a generational thing, or perhaps it was just too easy to get away with it, but core fans began to download fansubs in greater quantities than ever, while newly minted manga maniacs began treating the aisles of their local bookstore as a lending library. **Ever try to pick out a manga at Borders on a Saturday afternoon?** If you're like me, you have to hop, skip, and jump your way

through a gauntlet of undulating legs stretched out across the floor just to find the latest volume of *The Drifting Classroom* somewhere on the shelves!

They say the best things in life are free, but that's not *always* the case. While **anime fandom continues to grow by leaps and bounds** (just look at the exponential explosion in attendance at Anime Expo, the biggest anime con in America, for proof of anime's continued expansion), the anime industry is shrinking at an alarming rate. Why? Because we're in a transition—between formats, between generations—and no one is quite sure how best to deliver anime to fans in a way that's profitable. DVDs are still the primary way to watch anime here in the U.S., but they just can't compete with the allure of free (illegal) downloads.

Still, anime ain't going anywhere. It's superhot here in the States—it's even been cited as beating out sex as a search topic on the internet. Wowza! So despite the current challenges, I'm exceedingly interested in seeing how the anime industry changes and grows while it figures out how to capture this **incredibly passionate** audience. Meanwhile, it's a sizzling summer for us anime fans, with a ton of spectacular series coming out. We've got them all covered here, from the over-the-top insanity of *Gurren Lagann* to the quiet charm of *Emma*. We've also got a killer manga buyer's guide, along with a powerful game section. And we can't forget **the dozen gorgeous posters** (listed below)—perfect to proclaim your fandom at home, at work, at school, wherever. It's a great time to be an anime fan, and *Future Anime* is your ultimate guide to everything you'll want to watch this summer!

—Gary Steinman

THE DOZEN GORGEOUS POSTERS



Twenny Witches



Simoun



Negima!?



Shuffle!



Bleach



Disgaea 3



Afro Samurai



Fullmetal Alchemist



xxxHOLIC



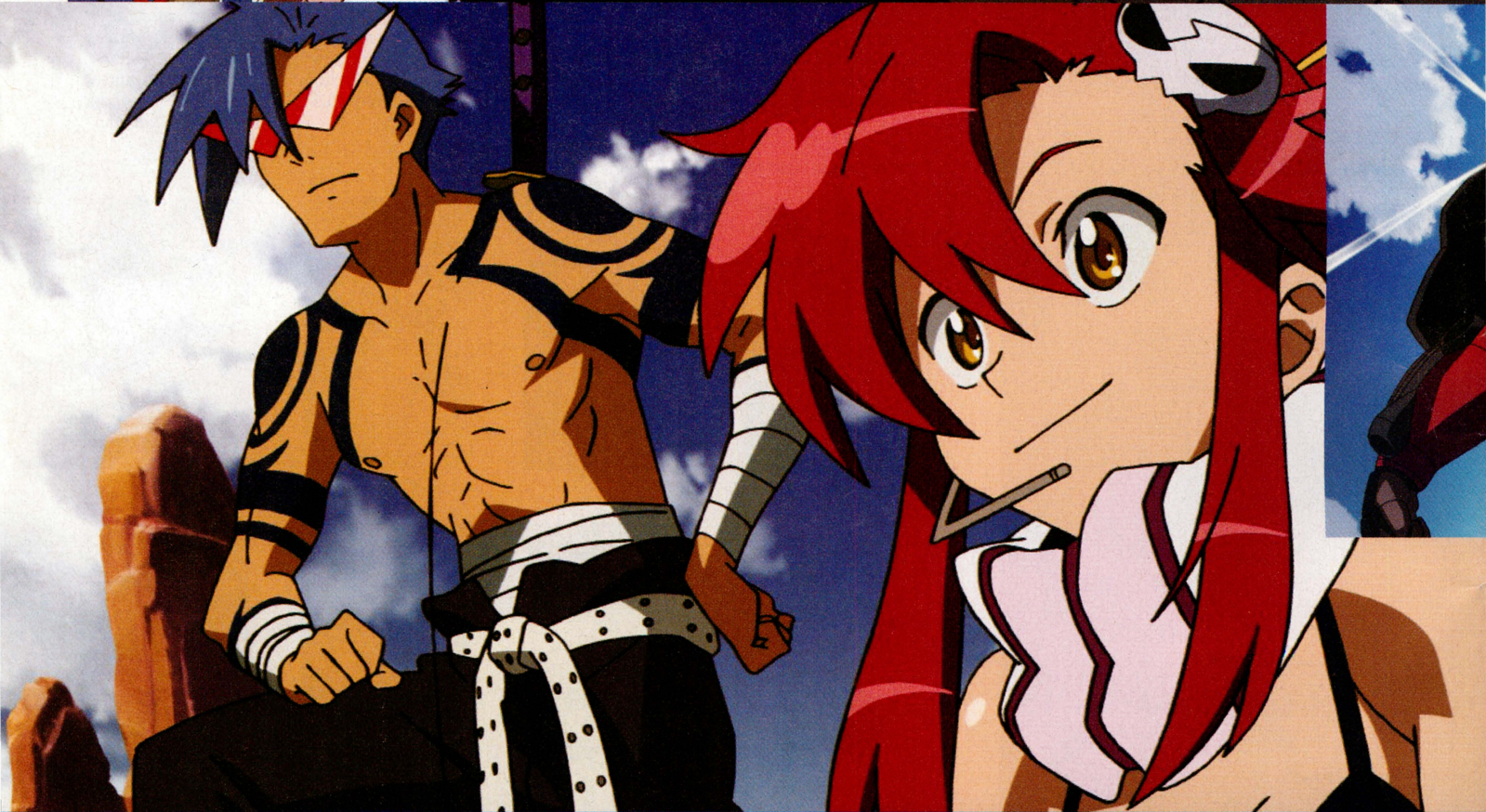
The Third



Voltron



Kite Liberator



GURREN LAGANN

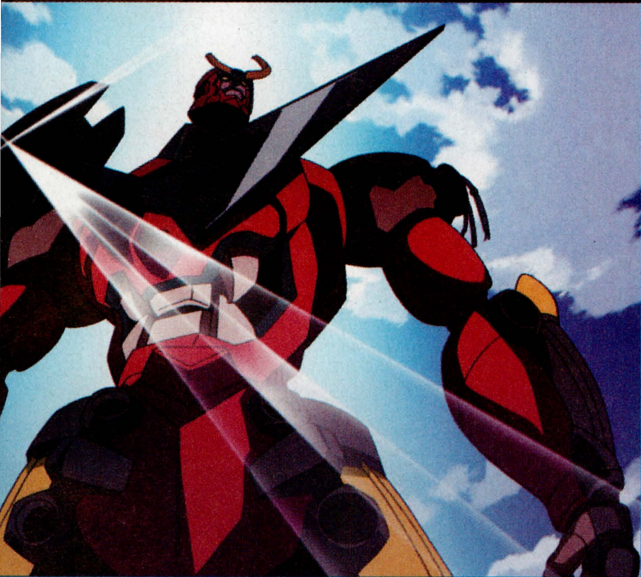
Publisher: Bandai
Entertainment

Producer: Gainax

Rating: 13+

Far in the future, humanity now lives deep underground. One day a boy named Simon is digging a hole to expand his village when he finds a special drill-like item that changes the lives of everyone around him.

BREAK ON



There's a moment a ways into *Gurren Lagann* when our hero is doubting himself. He's confused, he's uncertain, he doesn't know what to do. He feels like he might not have the will to keep on fighting. His spirit is lower than it's ever been before, even back when he was a lowly indentured servant digging tunnels underground for a pig-mole steak a day.

Then his best friend hits him, hard, right across the jaw, and tells him exactly where he can take that emo crap and shove it. After that our boy's more or less all right.

Gurren Lagann might be the most unashamed celebration of testosterone in anime history. At the very least, it's the wildest, craziest, right-in-the-kisser-est big-robot epic since *Giant Robo* finished its run 10 years ago. It is not afraid to act like a sock in the mouth solves problems, and if a 50-foot-high bright-red robot with hot-rod flames down the sides does the socking, all that much the better.

The story begins with the humble origins of Simon, a boy growing up in an underground village. His job is to dig and keep on digging, gradually hollowing out more and more space for his neighbors living down in those caverns.

Those dimly lit tunnels are all the world he knows. The elders of the village call the "surface" a myth, something made up by lazy goofballs who'd rather dream than face reality. Dreamer No. 1 is Simon's best buddy Kamina, a tattooed maniac in a cape and snazzy shades who wants to follow his long-lost father in search of the surface world.

As it happens, the surface world finds him instead. More to the point, it crashes right through the ceiling, sucking Simon and Kamina into the war for survival between Beastmen (who have big robots to stomp around the surface with) and humans (who have...well, not a whole lot to speak of).

That's not quite true, actually. The humans do have Yoko, a gorgeous girl

with an electromagnetic sniper rifle and the guts to go toe-to-toe with the Beastmen. And now they also have Kamina, who looks at those big robots and sees something he really, really likes. It won't be long before he and his ragtag "Gurren Brigade" are ready to go to war with the bad guys on an even footing.

When the stuff hits the fan, which doesn't take too long, "controlled chaos" might be the best way to describe it. Take a brief look and it's easy to write it off as a jumbled mess of constant violence. Just like Gainax's *FLCL*, though, *Gurren Lagann* has some very talented guiding hands holding everything together. The action goes right out to the edge and stays there—it never quite falls over, just as Yoko never quite falls out of the bikini top she wears all the time. (She says she likes to err on the side of freedom of movement, which is as good an excuse for gratuitous fan-service as any.)

Even when it's holding still, *Gurren* looks plenty wild. This is a cartoon that's not afraid to look like a cartoon. It's covered in the bright, eye-burning primary colors of old-school mecha animation—the Gurren-Lagann itself, Simon and Kamina's signature ride, wouldn't look out of place next to Getter Robo, Mazinger Z, or any other heroes of the '70s robot wars.

The neatest trick the show pulls off, though, is that the mecha never outshine the people. If the robots are bigger than life, the characters are bigger than that, from Kamina and his pure, concentrated macho to Simon and his hidden reserves of strength, to a supporting cast full of crazy, colorful soldiers for the Gurren Brigade. The action wouldn't be any fun at all if it didn't have heroes that made it mean something. *Gurren Lagann* has a soul to go with all the sound and fury—that, more than anything, is what makes it great. ☺

THROUGH

A Long, Strange Trip

While it wouldn't be fair to spoil too much, the war with the Beastmen is actually just the first movement in Gurren Lagann's long story. The series is broken down into four distinct arcs, which take the Gurren Brigade from their post-apocalyptic guerrilla war to total global conquest and beyond. By the end, our heroes get a chance to literally reach for the stars—the Japanese didn't call it "Heavenly Breakthrough Gurren-Lagann" for nothing.

By Fans, for Fans

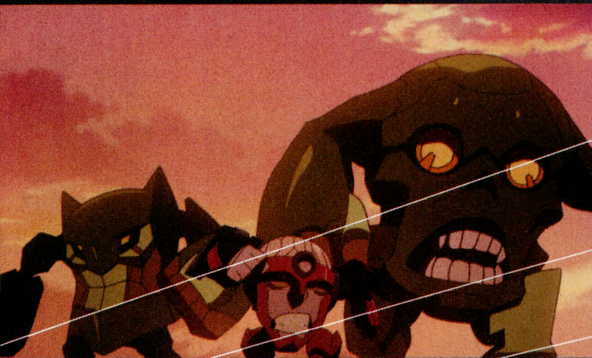
Gainax is a company that's made a specialty out of never quite doing what anyone expects. After the massive success of *Evangelion*, the most popular mecha anime series in a decade, nobody would have bet on director Hideaki Anno following up with a lighthearted shoujo romantic comedy, but we got *His and Her Circumstances* anyway. After that came the genre-smashing madness of *FLCL*, a show that would have come as a surprise no matter what preceded it.

If there's any common thread you can trace between *KareKano*, *Wings of Honneamise*, *Gurren Lagann*, and everything in between, it's this: You can tell it was made by fans. These are guys who all used to be geeks like the rest of us. They just took it a little bit farther than most.

You can see that in their reverence for classic animation. *Gunbuster*, the 1988 mecha favorite that gave Gainax its first big commercial hit, is more than half homage to *Aim for the Ace*, a classic shoujo sports romance from back in the '70s. *Evangelion* was heavily inspired by *Space Runaway Ideon*, a powerful sci-fi epic directed by *Gundam* creator Yoshiyuki Tomino in the early '80s.

Gurren Lagann, though, is the most open love poem the Gainax crew has written to the shows of their youth. It's filled with the spirit of those good old days, when men were men, robots were big, spaceships were bigger, and crazy ideas spilled out of every frame of animation. As the series gradually builds to its climactic arc, you can see





bits of everything from *Great Mazinger* to *Captain Harlock* that have landed in the blender and come out as part of a bigger, better whole.

This isn't a simple retro revival, though, or a game of spot-the-reference. You might call it the best of many different worlds. The colorful visuals and the non-stop action—those come from the kids' animation of the '70s. Take that and add an epic story, as well as real depth of character—the elements that took robot animation to a whole new level in the '80s. Finally, throw in a touch of the imaginative science fiction that we've grown to expect in the post-*Evangelion* era, the mark of shows like *RahXephon* and *Eureka Seven*. The old-school style may be what stands out, but *Gurren Lagann* has a little bit of every era in robot anime.

Old-school robots, new-school robots, post-modern robots (for lack of a less pretentious term), they all find their way into *Gurren's* mix. This show was clearly made by big-time mecha fans, and the odds are good that any mecha fan is going to love it.

—David F. Smith

Join the Army

The Gurren Brigade may start small, but once *Gurren Lagann* is off and running, it's tough to remember who's who in Simon and Kamina's crew. Here's a cheat-sheet for keeping track of a few.

YOKO: Chances are you'll never forget her, at least. Yoko doesn't need her own "Gunman" robot, since she's a dead shot with her long-barreled sniper rifle.

ROSSIU: Born in a tiny underground village and raised to revere the Gunmen as gods, he's not much of a fighter, but he's an excellent conscience for the rash, hotheaded leaders of the Gurren Brigade.

LEERON: He may seem like an odd fellow, but he provides Kamina and company with some much-needed brains for their outfit. Leeron's about the only member of the Brigade with the attention span to study and repair their Gunmen.

DAYAKKA: One of Yoko's old comrades from her surface village, a big lug with a heart of gold. He pilots the artillery Gunman Dayakkaiser, which often provides Yoko with a mobile sniping platform.

KITTAN: He and his cute lady sidekicks used to battle the Beastmen on their own, before falling in with the Gurren Brigade. His personal Gunman is the banana-yellow (and strangely banana-shaped) King Kittan.

JOGAN AND BARINBO: These burly twins look alike, but you can tell them apart by their glasses—Jogan wears the red ones. Naturally, they pilot a matching pair of Gunmen, the Twin Boukun.

CODE GEASS

CODE GEASS: LELOUCH
OF THE REBELLION

Publisher: Bandai
Entertainment

Producer: Sunrise

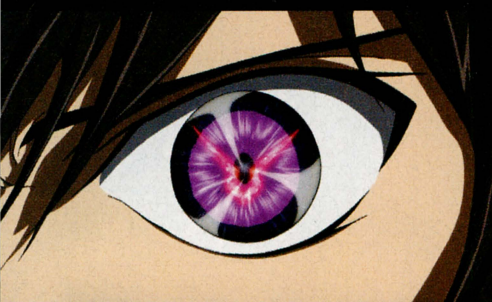
Rating: 13+

Once known as Japan, Area 11 is a broken country and its people are suppressed by the Britannian Empire. Lelouch hates the Empire and he embarks on a mission—a rebellion—to destroy it, with help from the mysterious power known as Geass.

CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION

ture ANIME Summer 08

©2006-2008 SUNRISE/PROJECT GEASS, MBS Character Design ©



Mixing massive mecha with a depressing dystopian future, *Code Geass* introduces us to a world of stunning CLAMP character designs, supernatural powers, and good old-fashioned rebellion. In 2010, the Britannian Empire set its sights on the island nation of Japan after a precious mineral called Sakuradite is discovered beneath Mt Fuji. Although defiant, Japan couldn't hold out forever, and the country eventually surrenders. Japan ceases to be and is renamed Area 11.

Teenager Lelouch Lamperouge and his disabled sister Nunnally attend the prestigious Ashford private school, reserved for the children of the Britannians who run the country and those Japanese who aided the invaders. While he looks normal enough, Lelouch has a secret: He's the outcast son of the Emperor, and his deep hatred for the Empire is about to explode and rock the foundations of Area 11.

Gifted with the power of Geass by a strange woman named C.C., Lelouch adopts the guise of Zero and begins to exact his revenge on his family. This mystical ability allows him to dominate someone else's will to the extent that he can make them commit suicide, but it only works once on each person. Hiding his true identity, Lelouch becomes the Robin Hood-like masked vigilante and begins to pick off the Empire, one relative at a time.

The crux of the series focus on Lelouch's relationship with those around him and how they motivate his actions: his beloved little sister Nunnally, who's his motivation for toppling the empire so that she can once again live in a

happy world; his best friend Suzuku, the son of Japan's last Prime Minister, who serves in the Britannian army and eventually pilots one of the huge mecha known as Knightmare Frames; and, of course, pizza-loving C.C. who gave Lelouch his powers in the first place. Her origin might remain a mystery, but Geass is clearly the magical ability that binds the series together.

Themes of nationality, loyalty, and morality run through the series. Lelouch adopts the persona of Zero, allowing him to become a hero to the Elevens while concealing his identity from those close to him. Zero soon becomes a figurehead for a movement much larger than one man, and Lelouch begins to cultivate an army to help him achieve his goals. As the storyline progresses, more points of view emerge, and Lelouch soon finds himself more and more at odds with his childhood friends. Suzuku pledges his allegiance to the Emperor but—as an Eleven—he will never become a true Britannian citizen. Instead, he is used and discarded when it suits his commanders, almost leading to his death...and yet still he fights on. Meanwhile, Lelouch's motivations might be good, but his methods are violent and bloody. He routinely orders soldiers to kill themselves, and he's prone to fits of mania that lend the entire

series a dark tone akin to *Death Note*.

Along with the dark plot and the powerful mecha, one additional element helps *Code Geass* stand out: the character designs. The series isn't actually an adaptation of a CLAMP manga, but the beloved creative quartet provided the designs and were involved in the animation process from early on.

Code Geass is a very different kind of anime, overflowing with righteous vengeance, graphic violence, misguided loyalties, massive mecha and strange powers—all of which make it the perfect series for anyone seeking a deeper, darker story that doesn't hold back.

—Lesley Smith



TSUBASA

Publisher: FUNimation

Producer: Bee Train

Rating: 13+

Syaoran and Princess Sakura continue their journey with Fai and Kurogane to strange new lands in search of Sakura's lost memories, which have been scattered across numerous worlds in the form of white feathers.

CHASING MEMORIES

Last year, anime fans were glued to their TV screens with the release of CLAMP's series *Tsubasa*. The show saw the reimagining of two of the most iconic characters in anime history: Syaoran and Sakura. Once a Cardcaptor, now a Princess, Sakura lived in the land of Clow and was about to confess her love to best friend Syaoran when all her memories were scattered across the universe in the form of white feathers of unimaginable power. After giving up their most important possessions to sorceress Yuko Ichihara in exchange for the ability to travel across dimensions, the duo (along with Mokona, the fun-loving mage Fay, and the serious warrior Kurogane) began retrieving Sakura's feathers. The second series continues their adventures across numerous countries and parallel worlds.

Originally a best-selling manga series (currently standing at over 20 volumes), *Tsubasa* takes the main characters from CLAMP's earlier shoujo hit *Cardcaptor Sakura* and places them

into an epic fantasy tale spanning a multiverse made up of CLAMP's other series. At the same time, the manga was intrinsically linked with the quartet's other ongoing series, *xxxHOLiC*, a darker supernatural tale focusing on Watanuki Kimihiro's indentured servitude to Yuko, with characters from *Tsubasa* crossing over to *xxxHOLiC* and vice versa. The manga packs in almost every character the four-woman team has created, from Miyuki-chan and Seichiro to Tomoyo and Chun Hyang, along with a host of lesser-known characters.

The first series, animated by Bee Train, introduced the characters and their epic quest. Syaoran and Sakura's unspoken love was a defining theme of the series, as their relationship would never be the same again due to Sakura losing all memories of her childhood friend as part of the price of their travels. At the same time, very little was known about their companions: Fay had bespelled Ashura in his homeland of Celes and then fled lest the king awaken, but

why? Meanwhile, Kurogane was the greatest samurai in the feudal land of Nihon but was sent to Yuko and cursed by his princess, Tomoyo—anyone he killed would weaken him. What drove Kurogane to become such a skilled fighter, and why is he so obsessed with defeating anyone stronger than he is?

If you've been seeking the answers to these questions, this new season will delve deeper into the series' mythology as well as introduce a new antagonist, the mysterious Chaos. While the series follows the basic of the plot of manga, it deviates quite a bit in the details, a fact that wasn't well received by Japanese fans, leading to the show finishing its run a season early. However, that doesn't mean it's not worth watching! Thanks to Bee Train's beautiful animation, a collective of talented Japanese and American voice actors, and the ethereal music of composer Yuki Kajiura, *Tsubasa* is a rollercoaster ride of action, magic and mayhem across a dozen worlds!

—Lesley Smith

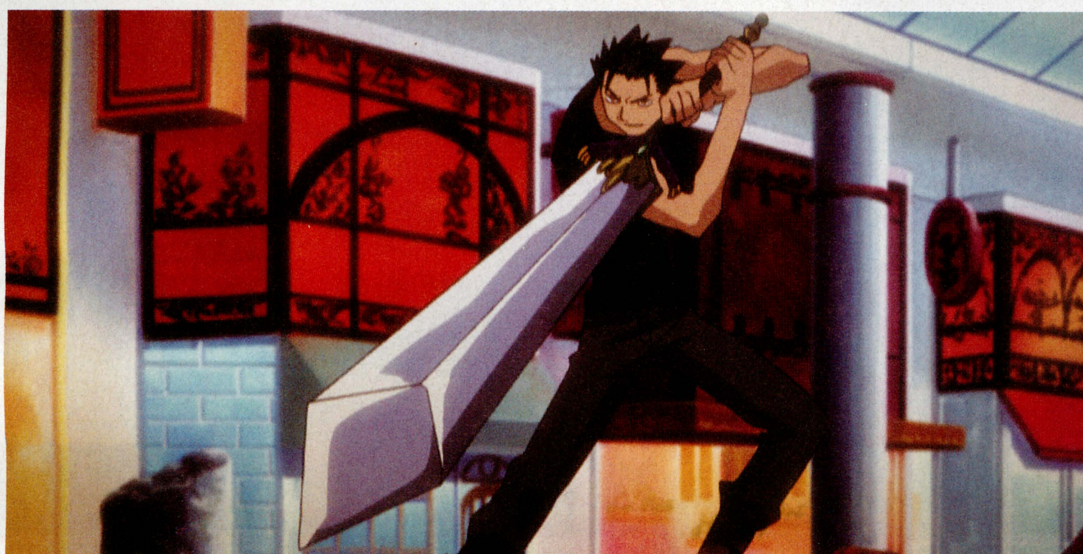


Based on the manga "TSUBASA - RESERVOIR CHRONICLE" by CLAMP originally serialized in the Weekly SHONEN MAGAZINE published by Kodansha Ltd.
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Returning to Tokyo: X Meets Tsubasa

When Tsubasa ended in November 2006, fans were left wanting more. Their prayers were soon answered with the announcement of a three-episode OVA that would be bundled with volumes of the manga in Japan. Focusing on the dark Tokyo arc, which featured cameos from characters previously seen in CLAMP's hit series X, the OVA was animated by Production I.G but saw the return of the Japanese voice cast, as well as a cameo from Sakura's alter ego, Sakura Kinomoto of *Cardcaptor Sakura* fame.



Pity poor Watanuki—a normal Japanese kid in all ways except one: He's psychic, and he's sick and tired of seeing all those ghosts. So when the mysterious witch Yuko Ichihara offers to grant his wish and make them go away, he jumped at the chance. But Yuko doesn't do anything for free; everything has its price and she asks all her clients for compensation. In Watanuki's case, this has led him to become her cook, cleaner, and bottlewasher—basically Yuko's all-around slave (in between school, that is).

Yuko's world is a strange place indeed. Existing alongside the mundane are spirits both good and bad. Fate and fortune are intermingled; the only absolute is *hitsuzen*, or inevitability. So when he's not busy buying Yuko sake or hangover cures, Watanuki begins to explore her world with his rival Doumeki, who's able to exorcise spirits (which he cannot see) using his archery skills. Yet Watanuki also remains linked to the real world thanks to his love for Himawari-chan, a normal girl who loves life but seems cursed to bring misfortune to those around her.

Debuting at the same time as the *Tsubasa* manga, *xxxHOLiC* is one of CLAMP's darkest series. The artwork borders on gothic, with thick lines surrounding the ornate black-and-white illustrations. Deeply ingrained in the mythology of the CLAMP multiverse, *xxxHOLiC* introduced the powerful Space Time Witch, who possesses untold power but seldom uses it, and who seems to know anyone of any significance across the myriad CLAMP worlds.

Yuko's shop, surrounded by the skyscrapers of Tokyo, is home to numerous ancient artifacts, and it's where Yuko, her assistants Moru and Maru (short for Morudashi and Marudashi—"streaking" and "flashing" in Japanese) and the Black Mokona live. People are drawn to Yuko, who offers them their wish in return for due payment, for hers is a world of checks and balances where everything has its price.

Like *Tsubasa*, the original manga had its share of cameos, but when the series was animated, Production I.G excised all references to Syaoran and Sakura's adventures (bar the appearance of Fay's staff being used as a futon beater). However, the series does contain one cameo in episode six: the appearance of two characters from CLAMP's recent manga series *Legal Drug*. Essentially a standalone show, the series mixes deliciously dark supernatural stories with Watanuki's sometimes comedic struggle to work off his debt to Yuko so she can grant his wish. Yet his powers allow him to accomplish extraordinary tasks and errands, making you wonder if his journey is actually about realizing he can live with his abilities, not about getting rid of them.

Each episode tends to focus on Yuko's clients, who all have their own addiction (hence the title) or problem that can't be solved by conventional means. Sometimes Watanuki gets more involved than he would like, and other times he simply runs his errands (which always seem to have something supernatural about them). Yet everything here is about balance. Nothing ever happens without a reason, and everything has its price.

The series has proven so popular in Japan that the manga is still running and a second anime series, *xxxHOLiC Kei*, began airing in April, focusing on the Spider Grudge arc of the manga, which sees Watanuki losing his right eye to a spider's grudge and finally getting over his rivalry with Doumeki. Part of the series' charm—particularly outside of Japan—is its reliance on Japanese folklore, which adds a distinctive flair and a mysterious weight to all the stories told in the show.

—Lesley Smith



xxxHOLiC

PUBLISHER: FUNIMATION

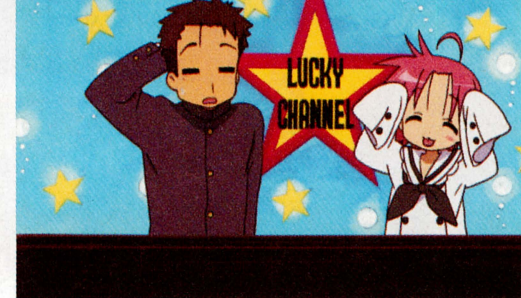
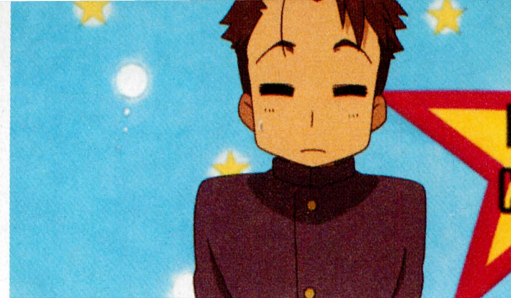
PRODUCER:
PRODUCTION I.G

RATING: TV-PG

Kimihiro Watanuki is plagued with the ability to see ghosts and spirits. One day he enters Yuko Ichihara's unique little shop in downtown Tokyo. Yuko offers to free Kimihiro from his supernatural sight, but at a price...

Based on the manga "xxx HOLiC" by CLAMP originally serialized in the weekly Young Magazine published by KODANSHA LTD.
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WISHES AND WONDERS



OTAKU OVERLOAD!

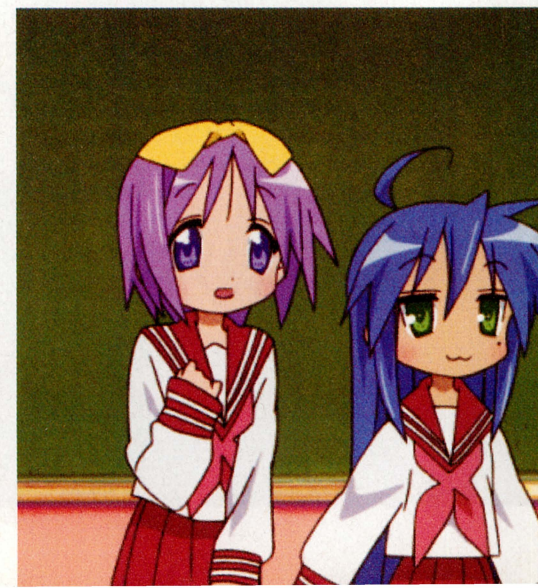
LUCKY STAR

Publisher: Bandai
Entertainment

Producer: Kyoto Animation

Rating: 13+

Join Konata, Miyuki, Tsukasa, and Kagami as they rock your world. These four girls epitomize every aspect of otaku culture, and they'll bring you along on a guided tour of Japanese culture like you've never seen it before!





Japan might be a land of mecha make-believe, but all that mayhem doesn't just come in the form of the manga that you already know and love. Just like the way our newspapers have short cartoons like *Peanuts* or *Garfield*, so Japan has its own unique take on strip cartoons: *koma*. *Lucky Star* is a prime example of this format. Originally a four-panel *koma* designed to fill space in computer gaming magazine *Comptiq*, the comic chronicles the adventures of four anime/light novel/MMO/manga-obsessed girls. It quickly proved to be a surefire hit, leading to an anime series that Bandai Entertainment is now bringing to the U.S.

Focusing on the lives of Konata Izumi, Miyuki Takara, and twins Kagami and Tsukasa Hiiragi, the series manages to be both unique and amusing. Sometimes *Lucky Star* just likes to poke fun—at itself, at other series, and even at Japanese culture—but *Lucky Star* isn't a parody of mainstream pop culture. Instead, it's aimed squarely at otaku. Even so, *Lucky Star* has single-handedly taken over Japan, where the series has become known for following the hippest otaku trends, with the girls sporting top-of-the-range phones, watching current anime series, and riffing on any anime related cliché you can think of, from pop idols and maid cafes to MMOs and erotic games. The DVDs have sold out in Tokyo's otaku-friendly Akihabara district, and there's a thriving trade of merchandise devoted to the series, including soundtracks, artbooks, figures, pillow cases, drama CDs, games, cell phone straps, balloons, calendars, and screen cleaners.

There's even a light novel!

While U.S. fans were waiting on an announcement that the show would see a release here, they got their first look at the series last November when a special teaser was included with the final volume of *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, featuring three minutes from episode 16, which has the girls visiting a maid café where Konata works. The teaser featured cameos from Haruhi's Yuki Nagato and Kyon—and Konata even does a Haruhi impression as well as the infamous dance routine! Not a bad way to promote the next big fan favorite series while paying homage to last year's biggest hit.

The teaser worked because *Lucky Star* manages to cram in more references to anime, visual novels, computer games and manga in 24 episodes than you might think humanly possible. The show is produced by Kyoto Animation—the studio behind some of the biggest series of the last few years (*The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, *AIR*, *Clannad* and *Kanon*). The animation is very different from what fans will be familiar with, with a childlike style that's in keeping with the look of the original strips. The series also sets a record for the number of theme tunes in one show: Each ending is different and normally involves a cover of a popular anime ending theme, like those from *Dragon Ball Z*, as well as four songs from Haruhi. If that weren't enough, one look at the opening animation and you know this is going to be an intensely hyperactive series!

—Lesley Smith



A Shrine to the Otaku

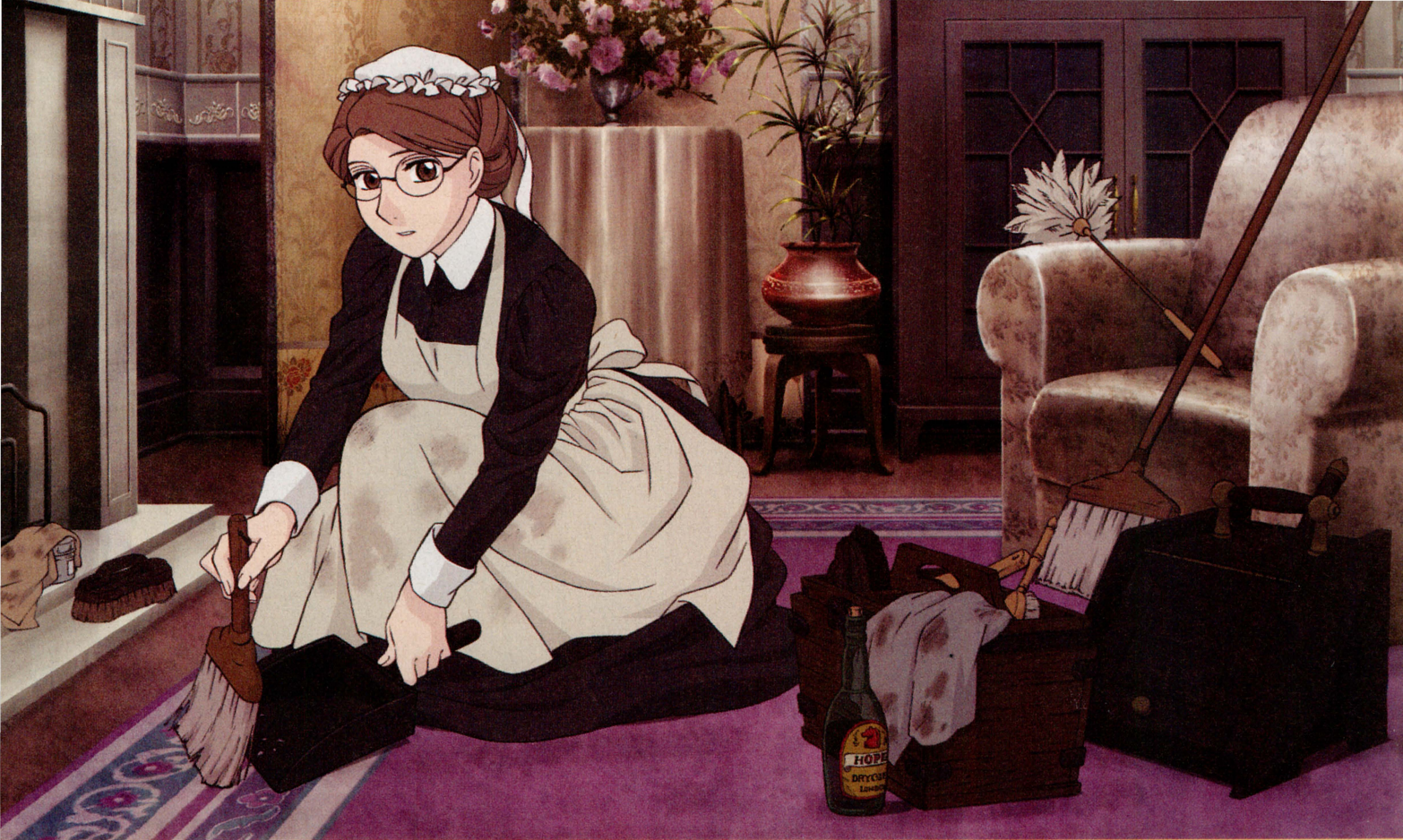
Lucky Star fans swarmed Washimiya in southern Saitama when they realized that it's the inspiration for locations featured in the anime. The shrine became a particular focal point—it appears in the series as the house where the Hiiragi twins live. Otaku were soon writing Konata-related wishes on *ema* (shrine plaques), even going so far as to cover the wooden plaques with fan art and turn up in full cosplayer attire. The flood of fans made headlines, ending up on national news stations, and Kadokawa, the company that publishes the anime series in Japan, even licensed four official *Lucky Star* *ema* phone straps!



MAID OF HONOR

EMMA**Publisher:** Right Stuf**Producer:** Studio Pierrot**Rating:** All Ages

Emma is a maid-of-all-work in the household of a retired governess in 19th-century London. William Jounes is a former student of her mistress, and the heir to a wealthy merchant family. Of course it's going to be love, but it'll take a while.



Every volume of Kaoru Mori's manga series *Emma* concludes with a few pages of afterword comics, where a tiny cartoon of the author herself shares some details about the series and the work that goes into it. The first of these includes a funny anecdote about a meeting with her editor, where he asks why a minor character gets so much attention.

"That's important!" she replies.

This part where Emma's skirt spreads out like so, he asks. Why does it do that?

"That's important too!"

All these close-ups of Emma taking off her glasses...

"That's important!"

The embarrassed look on Emma's face...

"That's the most important part of all!"

In other words, *Emma* is all about the details. It's founded upon a love story so slight and simple that a stiff breeze would pick it up and blow it away, while its characters are defined by their maddening inability to do practically anything at more than a snail's pace. The details, though, come together to create a portrait so lovely that the show's faults are easy to forgive.

Mori is a self-professed Anglophile of the highest order. Another panel in one of those afterword strips has a pie chart of her brain, roughly half of which is occupied by Victorian England. (Other healthy slices go to "Victorian Maids," "Glasses," "Miscellaneous Master/Servant Relations," and "Corsetry.") It's a credit to the TV show's producers at Studio Pierrot that almost every little example of her obsession makes it on screen.

There's nothing "cartoonish" in *Emma* beyond the characters' faces. Everything else in the frame is determinedly realistic, from clothing to buildings to the landscape of the English countryside, creating a contrast that works on a couple of levels. The characters are involving because they express themselves so clearly (thus the importance of Emma's sympathetically blushing face). Meanwhile, the world around them is absorbing

because there's so much detail to take in.

During the series' two seasons, we get quite the tour of England in the late 19th century, from the crowded streets of London to the Jounes family's country mansion. The first series' climax takes place in a gorgeous sequence set in and around the Crystal Palace, the legendary museum and garden that was the centerpiece of London's Great Exhibition in 1851, and that's only one of many famous landmarks the show passes by.

Yet *Emma* isn't just a historical travelogue (or a picture-book of Victorian fashions, or a 19th-century version of *Architectural Digest*). The love story may follow a timeworn pattern—it's at least as old as *Wuthering Heights*, and that's just the first predecessor that leaps to mind—but it sticks around because it works. While Emma and William are falling for each other, we the viewers wind up falling for them just as hard. It helps, perhaps, that the average anime fan is probably just as reticent, shy, and romantically paralyzed as they are.

Nevertheless, they do eventually come around, and rest assured that the high points of their romance are worth the wait. Right Stuf's DVD release means we don't have to wait all that long for it, either. The American version of *Emma* follows a laudable recent trend—instead of selling the show as a series of single DVDs, with new volumes coming out every month or two, Right Stuf is releasing it a full season at a time, for all of 50 bucks or less a box set. (By comparison, the Japanese home video version cost more than that for a single two-episode disc.)

Emma may not have "guaranteed hit" written all over it. There are no giant robots, no exploding heads, no gratuitous nudity, precious few primary colors, and none of the other hooks that traditionally mark a successful fan-favorite anime in America. What it does have, though, is a lovable pair of leads, and a wealth of period detail to admire and enjoy. Give it a look and you just might find your mind switching over to Kaoru Mori's wavelength.

—David F. Smith

Separate Service

The two *Emma* TV series released by Right Stuf aren't quite completely faithful to the original manga. Season one differs at a few key points, and season two is a pretty substantial departure. If you think about it, though, this is actually a good thing—you can watch the show and then enjoy the manga (or vice versa) without knowing exactly what's going to happen. The nine-volume comic series should soon be available in its entirety at your local bookstore, courtesy of CMX Manga.

SPIRITUAL



Ichigo Kurosaki can see spirits, something that's just a part of his life until he meets the *shinigami* (Soul Reaper) Rukia Kuchiki. Unfortunately, the strawberry-haired teenager gets in the way when Rukia is hunting down a Hollow, a malevolent spirit that likes snacking on recently deceased souls. Rukia is hurt during the encounter, leaving her no choice but to draft Ichigo as a Soul Reaper and transfer a portion of her power to him. Problem is, Rukia ends up giving him *all* her abilities and is forced to assume human form until she recovers. Initially reluctant, Ichigo soon embraces his new skills, even if he continually makes the rookie mistake of *not* stashing his human form somewhere sensible when he goes off fighting Hollows.

But *Bleach* isn't just Ichigo's adventure; he shares the stage with his friend Orihime. Gifted with hair a nearly identical shade as Ichigo's, Orihime was left an orphan after her older brother Sora was killed. Despite her inability to cook and her clumsy nature, she soon becomes a powerful force in the world of *Bleach* thanks to the mystical powers of her hairpins, which contain six tiny spirits. As the series continues, Orihime's powers grow—and she and Ichigo grow closer.

Shonen Jump has spawned a legion of successful titles, from *Naruto* to *Death Note*, and *Bleach* is no exception. *Bleach* began running in the famous manga magazine in 2001 and continues to this day. The popularity of the comic spurred a long-running series animated by Studio Pierrot beginning in 2004. Along with several seasons of the show, *Bleach* has also been brought to life in various computer games, OVAs, movies, a trading card game, and a musical. Phew!

BLEACH

Publisher: VIZ

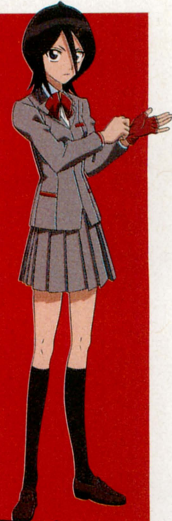
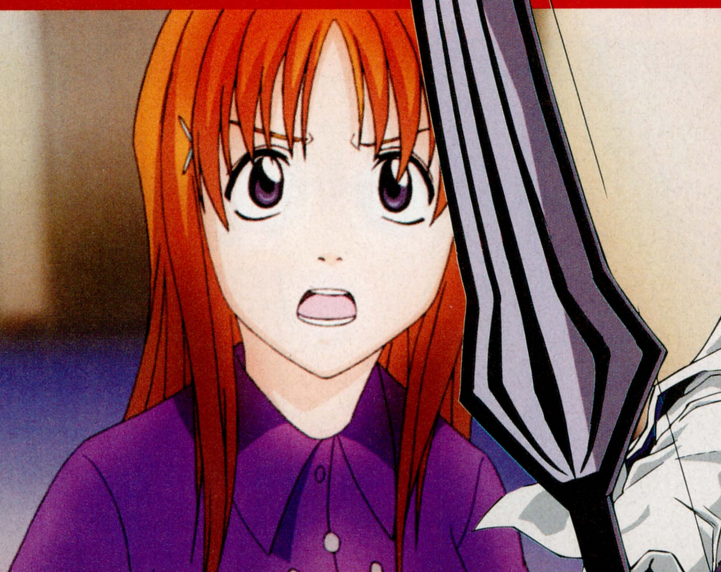
Producer: Studio Pierrot

Rating: Teen

Ichigo's ability to see spirits introduces him to a whole new world when he meets Soul Reaper Rukia. When she's harmed, he borrows her abilities and must face a world of malevolent spirits who threaten his family and friends.



SUBSTITUTION



Created by Tite Kubo, the series has a complex mythology revolving around the worlds of the living and the dead. Souls pass to Soul Society when they die, living there before returning to the human world, thus maintaining the balance between the two realms. Some become Soul Reapers, powerful warriors who can ease the passing of the recently dead and fight Hollows using swords called *zanpakuto*. Some souls, however, become embittered and refuse to pass on, eventually turning into Hollows who dwell in the bleak plane known as Hueco Mondo. Sometimes spirits—like Orihime's brother—are dragged into this unpleasant realm and forcibly transformed.

While the first season focuses on Ichigo and Orihime's nascent abilities, subsequent seasons begin to drip feed more information about Hollows, Soul Society, and the inner workings of the *Bleach* universe. Gradually the captains of various Soul Reaper squads are introduced, along with a furry (if annoying) mascot in the form of Kon, a stuffed lion who takes control of Ichigo's body when he's off on missions with Rukia.

For many anime series, the ultimate sign of success comes in the form of a movie—and *Bleach* has had two. VIZ is releasing the first film, *Memories of Nobody*, in theaters with a DVD release to follow later in the year. *Memories* was originally released to Japanese audiences in December 2006 and is pretty much a stand-alone story in relation to the anime series. Rukia and Ichigo are investigating a rash of mysterious ghostly creatures called Blanks that are walking the streets of Karakura Town when they come across a new Soul Reaper who calls herself Senna. Soon enough, Ichigo is forced to enter the aptly named Valley of Screams to rescue Senna when he discovers what she truly is. Meanwhile Rukia and the Soul Reaper captains have to deal with a dangerous clan who detest all that the Soul Reaper and Soul Society stand for. The film—also animated by Studio Pierrot—includes the action-packed fight scenes that made the anime so popular while expanding the *Bleach* universe even further.

Given *Bleach*'s popularity, it's no surprise the series is still going strong. Eight seasons later, and there's no end in sight for Rukia and Ichigo's adventures. Indeed, Ichigo's animated exploits have caught up with those in the manga, meaning the eighth season is an entirely original storyline, giving creator Tite Kubo time to get ahead with the manga. But there's still plenty for American anime fans to keep them going, including the release of Season Two on DVD and the continuing release of the manga. Indeed, with the movie headed to a theater near you and multiple ways to enjoy *Bleach* at home, this really might be the year of *Bleach*!

—Lesley Smith



Sisterly Love



MARIA WATCHES OVER US

Publisher: Right Stuf

Producer: Studio Deen

Rating: 13+

Yumi Fukuzawa is in her first year at the private Lillian Catholic School for Girls in the middle of Tokyo when a random act by her sempai, Sachiko, changes her life forever. Suddenly Yumi becomes the prime candidate for Sachiko's petit soeur—her little sister. Thrust into the limelight and confused and conflicted, Yumi has to decide what to do.



Parlez Vous Francais?

French plays an important part in *Maria Watches Over Us*, but you don't need to be a native or have even paid attention in class to understand what's going on. *Petit seour* and *grande seour* literally mean "little sister" and "big sister," while the various degrees in Lillian's Yamayuri Council also have French connections. The highest rank, *rosa*, is obvious (it means "rose"), and the three branches of the council are all names of different types of roses. The middle rank, *rosa en bouton*, means "a budding rose," and by this logic, the lowest rank translates as "little sister of the budding rose."

Anime series often attract a legion of fans for the most unlikely of reasons. Take *Maria-sama ga Miteru*, also known as *Maria Watches Over Us*, a touching series set in an all-girl Catholic school in Tokyo. Inspired by a long running-series of light novels by Oyuki Konno, the show stars freshman Yumi Fukuzawa, a quiet student who's still finding her feet at the prestigious Lillian Catholic School for Girls. The academy has an important tradition that puts a twist on the *kohei/sempai* (junior/senior) relationship that can be found all across Japan: a well-defined sisterhood. Older girls will give a freshman their rosary as a sign of their bond; the younger girl gains a *grande seour*, an older sister, to guide her through school life.

Yumi is astounded when an older girl, Sachiko Ogasawara, stops her to straighten her collar. This simple act of kindness stays with Yumi and will ultimately change her life forever when her friend Tsutako shows Yumi a picture capturing their meeting. Tsutako wants to use the picture in an exhibition. The catch? Tsutako wants Yumi to not only give her permission but to get the go-ahead from Sachiko as well. What follows is a rapid chain of events that leads to Yumi being offered Sachiko's rosary. The twist is Sachiko's reason for offering: Is she doing it because she wants a little sister—or is it just a tactic to avoid doing something else?

Thus begins the journey toward a deeper friendship between the two girls. But Yumi doesn't just learn from Sachiko; she also teaches her Older Sister how to kick back and chill out, eventually melting her cold exterior. Meanwhile, as the *petit seour* of a candidate to the school council, Yumi continues to learn about the school and how it functions, while preparing for a bigger role in the sisterhood of her school.

While the budding friendship between Sachiko and Yumi is complex and moving, the series initially garnered some unwarranted attention when it was hailed as an example of *yuri*, a popular genre of manga and anime that focuses on the relationships between two girls—typically an older one befriending a younger, more naïve girl—and often carries sexual connotations. However, *MariMite* (as its fans often call it) really is as sweet as it sounds, and it's won over plenty of fans who were initially attracted to the show for the, erm, wrong reasons.

The ongoing series of light novels, which sees several new volumes released in Japan each year, has become a cult hit, spawning the first of three anime series in 2004. Thirteen episodes introduced the girls of Lillian's and retold a touching story of sisterhood and friendship in a truly beautiful anime. Series like this have a habit of attracting fans through word of mouth, and *Maria* has already garnered critical acclaim throughout the anime world. Recently announced by Right Stuf as one of its releases for this year, *Maria Watches Over Us* will be out in July as a full-season box set featuring the Japanese dub, two English subtitle tracks, and a collection of comical shorts starring chibi versions of the girls.

—Lesley Smith

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THE ON MARS

ARIA THE ANIMATION

Publisher: Right Stuf

Producer: Hal Film Maker

Rating: 13+

Akari Mizunashi is an apprentice gondolier who learns her trade in the watery Aquan city of Neo Venezia.

Elemental Aqua

Despite being a slice-of-life series, *Aria* has elements of sci-fi technology along with a mythological twist. The word Undine is based on ancient mythology and is the name given to mermaid-like water spirits like naiads and nereids who dwell in oceans and rivers. Likewise, the other major professions on Aqua have similar connotations: Gnomes, for example, are the seldom-seen technicians who keep the planet stable as well as being small earth spirits synonymous with mining and living underground. In keeping with their environment, many Aquan Gnomes are also really short and can't see particularly well. Sylphs, on the other hand, are air spirits—but in *Aria* serve as delivery people, riding around on the breeze using flying machines. Finally, Salamanders regulate the weather from floating air balloons that drift above Neo Venezia—although in myth they're lizard-like spirits who make their homes in fire.



Earth has been thoroughly depleted, and mankind must now find a way to thrive on the terraformed planet formerly known as Mars. Wait! Hang on...this isn't the setup for yet another cliché sci-fi anime series. Instead, this is the premise behind *Aria the Animation*, perhaps one of the most unconventional anime to be released this year. Rather than focusing on a futuristic world full of suffering and decay, *Aria* is in fact a serene slice-of-life series chronicling the adventures of Akari Mizunashi, a wannabe gondolier (or "Undine") who has travelled from Manhome to the watery world of Aqua (aka Mars) to train under one of the three Water Fairies.

Working at Aria Company in the recreated city of Venice (now known as Neo Venezia), Akari is an apprentice (called a Single because of the glove she wears to protect her hand) to Alicia Florence, a Prima Undine and one of the planet's three most accomplished gondoliers. Twenty months into her apprenticeship, Akari is beginning to master the control of her gondola while learning about the city, sometimes through her own explorations and other times through her clients. The series follows her growth into a cheerful adult as well as an accomplished Prima Undine.

At the same time she makes friends with apprentices from the city's other companies—Alice from Orange Planet and Aika from Himeya Company. While some rivalries exist among them, the three girls soon become firm friends. The sentimental meandering is broken up with occasional burst of pitch-perfect comedy, especially from Aria-shachou, an intelligent feline mascot and president of Akari's company, who seems to exist solely to add a comic element. At other key moments, the three girls assume a chibi form when embarrassed or bickering, which suitably lightens the mood.

Akari, a pink-haired teenager, was first introduced in Kozue Amano's manga *Aqua* and its sequel *Aria* (both of which are published in the U.S. by TOKYOPOP). The manga regularly topped the Japanese best-seller lists, so it was no surprise when an anime adaptation was announced. The first series, *Aria the Animation*, began airing on Japanese TV in October 2005; a second and third series (*Aria the Natural* and *Aria the Origination*) followed in 2006 and 2008, with a 30-minute OVA (*Aria the OVA - Arietta*) released in 2007. In Japan, the series has also inspired light novels, drama CDs, artbooks and a visual novel for PS2.

Aria the Animation ran for a relatively short 13 episodes, but it nonetheless made it into Asahi TV's list of the top 100 anime series. The sensual animation and sedate pace is complemented by beautiful opening themes sung by Yui Makino (the Japanese voice of Sakura in *Tsubasa*). Indeed, *Aria's* charm lies in the fact that there's no pressure to explain plot points or hurry through certain arcs; the entire franchise goes at its own pace and focuses instead on character development.

Aria was also one of the series—like cult hits *Air* and *Kanon*—that many American fans assumed would never see a U.S. release due to its niche status. Right Stuf and Nozomi Entertainment thus surprised everyone with their recent announcement regarding *Aria's* release, starting this September. The fan-favorite series is one of a growing number of shows being released subtitled-only, meaning each volume should hit shelves faster than usual and will directly appeal to the kind of viewer who prefers the authenticity of the original Japanese. Regardless of where you stand on the never-ending sub/dub debate, *Aria's* speedy release is sure to please those of us who've been eagerly anticipating a relaxing ride in Akari's gondola.

—Lesley Smith

BANISH MORE DEMONS



DEVIL MAY CRY

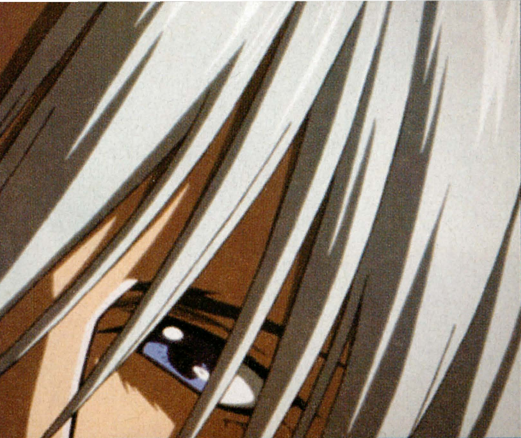
Publisher: ADV Films

Producer: Studio Madhouse

Rating: TV-MA

The famous demon-slayer from Capcom's video games enjoys a few more devil-hunting outings in this 12-episode TV series





When Capcom revealed the first *Devil May Cry* video game, it pulled an amusing little bait-and-switch move. The first half of the game's debut promotional trailer showed off nothing more than Conan the Barbarian-style sword-swinging, making it look like some kind of quasi-medieval hack-and-slash throwback.

Then Dante hollered his first famous one-liner—"Time to go to work, guys!"—and hauled out his guns. That moment may well have won the game more fans than anything else that came afterward. It announced that the priority in *Devil May Cry* was doing as much damage as possible, with "looking good doing it" in a very close second place.

The better part of a decade later, Dante's act still hasn't run out of gas. He took something of a backseat role when *Devil May Cry 4* hit next-generation consoles, but he was still synonymous with the franchise's smart-mouthed attitude and relentlessly stylish violence. Meanwhile, even as a youngster named Nero was taking over top billing on the video game side of things, Dante was branching out to headline his own anime series.

One reason the *Devil May Cry* TV show is interesting is the *Devil May Cry* games give it so little to work with. Dante himself is more or less the only constant in the first three games, and he charges around an environment that's barren of almost anything but gigantic monsters that need to be killed. Is it the past? The future? The modern day? Another planet? What does it matter? There's a great horrible lava spider bearing down that halfway like a freight train, and the big sucker ain't gonna kill itself.

Though nobody's going to complain that it doesn't have enough action, the *Devil May Cry* anime drags Dante kicking and screaming into something like a recognizable world. It also gives him a couple more characters to bounce off of—important, since a monologue that lasted 12 episodes would probably wear out its welcome, no matter how clever Dante's wisecracks might be.

Dante already had a couple of gals Friday, in the form of his part-demon nemesis Trish and his fellow devil-hunter Lady. They get a little more fleshing out in the anime (one funny episode consists almost entirely of a running gunfight between Lady and Trish), and they're joined by a cute kid sidekick—because there has to be a cute kid sidekick, after all. Besides being cute, Patty Lowell does her best to provide a civilizing influence on Dante, an effort that's consistently amusing in its futility.

The man himself, of course, is still only truly alive when he's out looking for something to kill. Otherwise he lounges around his dusty of-



fice, feet propped on the desk, his face shaded underneath a skin magazine as he naps the day away. He lives off a steady diet of delivery pizza and strawberry sundaes washed down with beer, which would balloon the poor guy right out of demon-slaughtering shape if he didn't spend so much time...well, slaughtering demons.

Naturally, the lion's share of his time is spent doing exactly that. The animators at Studio Madhouse are old hands when it comes to violent supernatural action, having cut their teeth making movies and OVAs for splatter king Yoshiaki Kawajiri in the old days. (Kawajiri is most famous for *Ninja Scroll*, but he also gave us *Wicked City*, *Running Man*, and the *X* movie, all of them with Madhouse backing him up.) When Dante decides that it's time to go to work, the production crew goes to work right behind him—the gunfights here are even cooler than what you can pull off in the video games.

That's the leap the show had to make. It has to be more interesting than being Dante yourself, because otherwise the video game version is right there. The *Devil May Cry* anime works in its own right, though—in part by filling in more of the world around Dante, and in part by kicking the action up yet another notch. Even in a market where badass action heroes seem like they're a dime a dozen, Capcom's devil hunter is still a breed apart.

—David F. Smith



KAMEHAMEHA!!

DRAGON BALL Z
ON BLU-RAY

Publisher: FUNimation

Producer: Toei Animation

Rating: All Ages

The first two theatrical outings for the Z Warriors are also among the first examples of anime on Blu-ray. They're not going to be very lonely for long, though.





Best of the bad old days

High definition only does so much for recent, all-digital TV anime productions. Several shows produced with standard-definition broadcast in mind have been released as "upscanned" HD discs in Japan, but they don't really benefit from the quick-and-dirty conversion to a higher resolution. What *will* look great on a proper Blu-ray release are older theatrical productions from the era of traditional cel animation. Those will take time to produce, but Bandai Visual's Blu-ray version of *Wings of Honneamise* is a gorgeous taste of things to come.

The war between high-definition home video discs was a game for high rollers to play. Big-time Hollywood studios and gigantic electronics conglomerates slugged it out to see which new-fangled format would rule the worldwide market, and just about everyone else did their best to get the heck out of the way until the dust cleared.

Now, of course, the war is over. Toshiba threw in the towel at the tail end of February, withdrawing its HD-DVD format from the market. Sony's rival Blu-ray Disc is all that's left now, meaning smaller publishers—like the ones releasing anime over here in America—can crawl out of their bunkers and start bringing more and more high-def animation to market. We've seen a few HD releases here and there, but the first HD anime to make a big splash in the states will be *Dragon Ball Z*.

The massively popular *DBZ* TV series is staying on traditional DVD for now. It's not as if the comparatively lo-fi TV production would benefit much from the jump to high definition anyhow. *Dragon Ball*'s theatrical outings are another matter entirely, though—FUNimation eventually plans to have all 15 movies and TV specials out on Blu-ray in convenient two-movie sets.

First up on the release list, and available as you read this, is a double-feature release of the first two *DBZ* movies, *Dead Zone* and *The World's Strongest*. Both movies come in 1080p high definition, with 5.1-channel surround sound for the English voice track (which you can listen to with your choice of the new American background music or the music from the original Japanese release). FUNimation oversaw a painstaking transfer process to be sure of a clean conversion to high-definition digital video, and the result is pretty easily the best-looking *Dragon Ball* animation you'll ever see. Nearly all of the wear and tear on the decades-old film masters has been neatly scrubbed away.

With Blu-ray disc players still commanding asking prices of \$400 and up (the popular PlayStation 3 game console is no exception, either), many anime fans might reasonably ask why they ought to take the high-def plunge. It's true that there's not a preponderance of compelling reasons quite yet—unless you really want those *Dragon Ball Z* movies—but the floodgates are about to open.

Over the past year in Japan, TV animation has been more and more frequently produced with high definition in mind. Big-ticket action shows like *Gundam 00* and the new *Code Geass* series look gorgeous in HD, and the odds are good they'll see home video release on Blu-ray when

they come to America in the next year or two. VIZ, Bandai, and Funimation have all openly confirmed plans for more Blu-ray releases now that the format war is over. Bandai Visual's departure from the American market left a couple of its planned Blu-ray projects in limbo, but it's safe to say that even if BV doesn't bring out the Blu-ray version of *Akira*, somebody definitely will.

In addition to the *Dragon Ball* double bills—the second of which will serve up the *Bardock* and *History of Trunks* one-shot specials in July—FUNimation has a Blu-ray version of Samuel L. Jackson's *Afro Samurai* due out in August. One month later, *Robotech: The Shadow Chronicles* will get a definitive Blu-ray release, complete with even more extras that weren't included on last fall's double-disc DVD set. *Robotech*'s producers at Harmony Gold say they produced the movie with high-def in mind all along, and only waited to see which format would come out on top.

Combine all that with the falling price of high-definition-capable flat-screen TVs, and you don't have to be a maddened early-adopting videophile to look at HD and see an attractive proposition. The anime business may have been cautious at first, but over the rest of 2008 and 2009, we're going to see an explosion of high-def anime on Blu-ray.

—David F. Smith

Buyer's Guide

I Love Manga in the Summertime

Summer is traditionally a time for light reading—something to help pass the time while you're out on the beach as you try to rectify that pasty otaku pallor. But with so many manga on the shelves, it's tough to know where to begin. We've carefully culled a selection of manga (both new releases and old favorites) that'll make for a good time no matter where you happen to spend those lazy summer days.

—David F. Smith



EYESHIELD 21 © Kome Studio • Village Studio/Shueisha • TV Tokyo • NAS

ACTION



Black Lagoon

Publisher: VIZ

Age Rating: 18+

Available: August

Guns don't kill people. Revy kills people. The two-fisted enforcer for the Lagoon Trading Company isn't the star of this series, though—that honor goes to her comrade Rokuro Okajima, "Rock" for short, a hapless Japanese middle-manager who somehow falls in with a crew of hard-bitten South Seas pirates. *Black Lagoon* is at least as action-packed and exciting as the anime series it inspired.



Saiyuki Reload

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now (Eight volumes)

The adventures of Genjo Sanzo on his "journey to the west" keep on trucking in the second leg of Kazuya Minekura's fan-favorite series. Start with the original series if you want to follow every bit of this hard-edged modern take on a classic Chinese legend, but be warned that you may wind up hooked bad enough to keep going all the way into *Reload* and beyond.



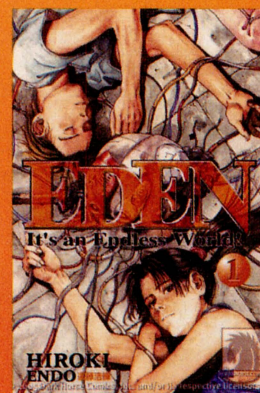
Worst

Publisher: Digital Manga Publishing

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now (Three volumes)

Suzuran High School's student body doesn't represent the best and brightest youth of Japan. The title sums these guys up pretty well—they're the toughest, ugliest, meanest goons that dozens of bare-knuckled brawls can produce. Only VIZ's *Golgo 13* could even come close to matching the amount of pure testosterone in these pages. Check this one out for a knock-down-drag-out good time.



Eden

Publisher: Dark Horse

Age Rating: 16+

Available: Now (10 volumes)

Hiroki Endo's bitter, beautiful story of life after an apocalyptic virus outbreak might well be the finest manga money can buy these days. You'll have to begin at the beginning—the complex plot builds like a snowball rolling down a hill—but the gorgeous artwork and intense emotional impact are more than worth the time.



Appleseed

Publisher: Dark Horse

Age Rating: 14+

Available: Now [Two volumes]

Masamune Shirow's sci-fi classic has been available in America for quite some time, but Dark Horse is in the middle of re-issuing the series in a compact new format, restoring the original right-to-left page order and keeping the fine English translation by Studio Proteus. It's a great blend of action and thoughtful futurism. (If you like this, also check out the re-released versions of Shirow's *Dominion* tank-police adventures.)

HORROR



Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service

Publisher: Dark Horse

Age Rating: 16+

Available: Now [Six volumes]

Half a dozen misfits graduate from a Buddhist university with average grades and way-below-average job prospects. They each have a skill that lends itself to an unusual business, though—bringing home the bodies of the unquiet dead. Writer Eiji Ohtsuka comes up with clever, spooky stories, and editor Carl Horn brings the characters to life with smart, snappy English dialogue.

SHOUJO



Vampire Knight

Publisher: VIZ

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now [Four volumes]

The title gives away the big secret behind Hino Matsuri's gorgeous supernatural drama—exclusive Cross Academy provides cover for a small colony of vampires. Yuki Cross and her childhood friend Zero Kiryu are two normal human students charged with keeping the elite "Night Class" under control, but that's never an easy job at the best of times.



King of Thorn

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 16+

Available: Now [Five volumes]

In the not too distant future, the "Medusa virus" kills nearly every human being on earth, except for a small group of children preserved in cryogenic storage to wait for the end of the pandemic. The world they wake up to might turn out to be even more dangerous than the virus they slept through, though. Yuji Iwahara's haunting sci-fi thriller features gorgeous artwork and a plot that never seems far away from the next shocking twist.



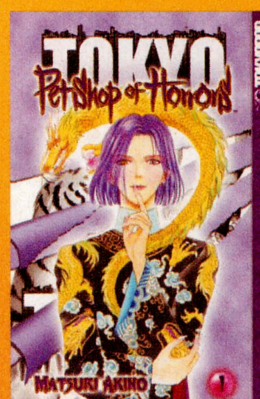
To Terra...

Publisher: Vertical

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now [Three volumes]

For a taste of shoujo manga's early days, check out this classic from Keiko Takemiya, recently adapted for a new TV anime. Takemiya's beautiful, ethereal artwork tells the story of Jomy Marcus Shin, a young boy who finds himself gradually awakening to the next step in mankind's psychic evolution. He and his fellow "Mu" have a mission—to discover Terra, humanity's ancestral home planet.



Pet Shop of Horrors

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 14+

Available: Now [Nine volumes]

The mysterious Count D sells all manner of fascinating pets to the discerning customer, but these are the kind of animal companions that you'd better not feed after midnight. Matsuri Akino uses the Count's twisted pet store as a springboard for all kinds of spooky stories, while her lovely artwork helps the horror go down nice and smooth.



Antique Bakery

Publisher: Digital Manga Publishing

Age Rating: 14+

Available: Now [Four volumes]

Fumi Yoshinaga's low-key drama series is one of this summer's hot new anime in Japan, and the honor is long overdue. Guys and girls alike should enjoy these stories of a hard-bitten businessman and the coffee shop he runs (which employs, among others, a "magically gay" pastry chef and a bitter ex-boxer who serves up the cakes). It's hard to describe *Antique Bakery's* unique charm, but check it out yourself and you'll definitely understand.

DRAMA



Beck

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now [12 volumes]

It reads like a sports series, as an aimless young hero discovers his hidden talents, but the "sport" is rock 'n' roll, and the arena is the rough-and-tumble world of the Japanese indie music scene. Harold Sakuishi clearly loves rock as much as anything in the world, and so do his characters, who'll fight tooth and nail for a chance to finally make it to the top. If you liked the hit anime series, jump on board the manga to read the whole story.

DRAMA cont.



Genshiken

Publisher: Del Rey

Age Rating: 14+

Available: Now [Nine volumes]

Kio Shimoku's stories about the lives and loves of a college-age Japanese geek club are exceptionally true to life. If you spend any time around anime and manga fandom, you've probably met almost everyone in its pages. When it's not surprisingly sensitive, it's incredibly funny, even if you're not too clear on what this whole "otaku" thing's about. The entire series is available now, and Del Rey plans to release a special supplement book later in the summer.



Shirley

Publisher: CMX

Age Rating: All ages

Available: Now [One volume]

Kaoru Mori clearly cannot get enough maids. If you can't either, pick up this one-shot from the author of *Emma*, featuring a series of brief slice-of-English-life stories about a young girl enlisted to keep house for a widowed café owner. There's no violence, no romance, no blood, and no big robots, but it's hard to imagine a more charming manga coming out this summer.

SPORTS



Slam Dunk/REAL

Publisher: VIZ

Age Rating: 12+

Available: July

Takehiko Inoue had a huge hit back in the '90s with *Slam Dunk*, despite the fact that Japanese kids weren't really into basketball at the time. It was so successful that he stuck with the subject in *REAL*, albeit with a twist—his later series is all about wheelchair basketball, and three accident victims who use it to find a way to come to terms with their paralysis. Both strips are some of the finest (and in *Slam Dunk*'s case, funniest) sports manga on the market.



Eyeshield 21

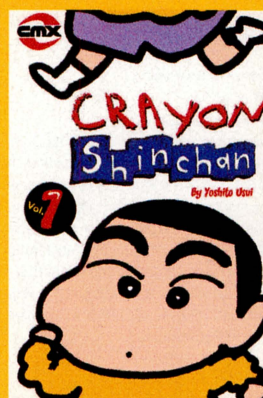
Publisher: VIZ

Age Rating: 12+

Available: Now [21 volumes]

Why is it that you have to go all the way to Japan to find a comic about a quintessentially American sport? Whatever the reason might be, the important part is that *Eyeshield 21* is a riot regardless of whether you know the first thing about football. Underdog hero Sena Kobayakawa leads a motley cast of hilarious high school misfits, and Yusuke Murata's energetic artwork hits like a strong safety on a blindside blitz.

COMEDY



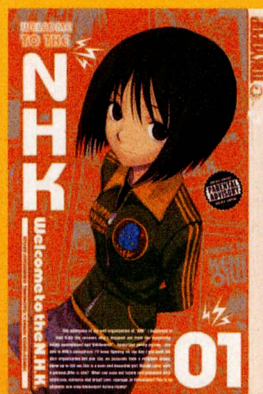
Crayon Shin-chan

Publisher: CMX

Age Rating: 10+

Available: Now [Two volumes]

See the series that inspired the raunchy Adult Swim cartoon in all its antisocial glory. Five-year-old Shin-chan is the adult world's worst enemy—rude, crude, totally uncontrollable, and prone to the kind of insight that only comes from the mouths of babes. Don't worry, though. For every occasional moment of penetrating satire, there's panel after panel of Shin showing off his infamous "Zo-san" dance.



Welcome to the NHK!

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 14+

Available: Now [Seven volumes]

For a look at the life of a Japanese geek through a slightly darker lens, look no further than this mind-bendingly bitter black comedy. After three solid years of hiding inside his apartment, Tatsuhiro Sato is trying to fix his broken personality, but it's not going quite so smoothly as he'd hoped, and his smut-mad otaku neighbor definitely isn't helping. Wickedly funny, providing you can take it.



Sgt. Frog

Publisher: Tokyopop

Age Rating: 16+

Available: Now [14 volumes]

Five amphibious aliens spearhead an invasion of Earth...or that's the idea, anyway. In practice, they become the live-in guests of Fuyuki Hinata and his suburban Tokyo family, with volume after volume of unpredictable consequences. Serious anime and manga fans should love spotting all kinds of in-jokes and parodies, riffing on everything from *Gundam* to *Space Adventure Cobra*.



He Is My Master

Publisher: Seven Seas

Age Rating: Older Teen

Available: Now [Three volumes]

He Is My Master takes a long-overdue bite out of the "harem comedy" genre—those ubiquitous stories where hordes of girls swarm around some geeky guy for no obvious reason. Here, the geeky guy is improbably rich and impossibly perverted, while his harem of ladies takes every chance they can to strike back with some well-deserved revenge. It's silly, it's cheesecake, but it's also roundly hilarious.

Required Reading

Light novels, a very Japanese take on serialized fiction for teens and young adults, are becoming more commonplace in our bookstores and libraries. Mixing prose with distinctive manga illustrations, they're the perfect extension to popular series as well as the ideal way to discover new ones. We picked our favorite seven light novels—one in each category—to get you started.

—Lesley Smith



ROMANCE

Good Witch of the West: Books One and Two

Noriko Ogihara

Tokyopop

Firiel Dee thinks she's a normal girl living in Sera Field, until a pendant left by her dead mother reveals that she's actually heir to the throne. Catapulted into a life-or-death struggle, she discovers new friends and enemies in the story that inspired both the enchanting manga and the anime series. A beautiful series perfect for those lazy summer days.



SCI FI

Trinity Blood: The Star of Sorrow

Sunao Yoshida

Tokyopop

This story of a dystopian future destroyed by vampires was one of the first novels in Tokyopop's Pop Fiction lineup. Anyone who's seen the anime will be on familiar turf—and it's worth mentioning that it was the novel that inspired the anime series, not the other way around. The story follows the bumbling priest and AX agent Abel Nightroad, a man with a secret. In this future, humanity's last bastion of hope against the vampires are a handful of kingdoms and the might of the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, though, Abel and his colleagues are the ones fighting it out on the front lines in this supernatural sci-fi adventure.



SUPERNATURAL

Shinigami no Ballad

K-suke Hasagawa

Seven Seas Entertainment

A moving tale of an emissary of death and her feline companion. Momo guides souls to the afterlife, and while she's unseen for the most part, she still touches the lives of all those around her. This little book is truly authentic to the Japanese original, including the delicate color images, all the honorifics, and even the diminutive Japanese dimensions, making it a must-read for all fans of the anime series.



FANTASY

Twelve Kingdoms: Books One and Book Two

Fuyumi Ono

Tokyopop

An epic series, *Twelve Kingdoms* begins in our world with red-headed Youko, a normal schoolgirl who suddenly finds herself transported by a strange young man to a mystical land, one of the Twelve Kingdoms of the title. She soon learns the man she met is a kirin, a sacred creature (similar to a unicorn) capable of changing from human to animal form at will. According to the laws of the kingdoms, only the kirin can appoint the next ruler. The second book in the series turns this idea on its head and focuses on Taiki, who was raised on Earth but is actually a kirin who must appoint the next ruler of the land of Tai.



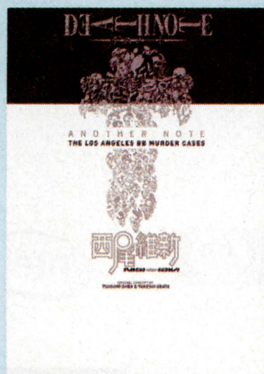
ROMANCE

Oh My Goddess: First End

Yumi Tohma

Dark Horse

You've seen the OVAs, the movie, and both of the TV series, but that's not the end of Belldandy and Keiichi's adventures. Written by Yumi Tohma, the Japanese voice of sultry goddess Urd, this is an original tale illustrated by Kosuke Fujishima and Hidenori Matsubara. Bell and Keiichi's relationship now threatens the universe, as Keiichi becomes its focal point, vanishes from reality, and the universe implodes on itself. Cast into the past with her memories intact, Urd has to warn her sisters and find out what going on—to save not just the people she cares about but the entire world!



THRILLER

Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases

Nisio Isin

VIZ

Published after *Death Note*'s popularity reached fever pitch thanks to the best-selling manga and gothic anime series, this prequel is narrated by L's apprentice Near and takes place several years before the appearance of Kira. L teams up with young FBI Agent Naomi Misora, girlfriend of the Raye Pember who trailed Light Yagami in the manga. As dark and craftily constructed as the original manga, this is the perfect book for anyone who craves a good summer thriller.



ANTHOLOGY

Faust

Various

Del Rey

Hitting bookstores later this year is *Faust*, which is based on the monthly light novel anthology magazine of the same name. This volume collects some of the best stories from prominent authors and offers a sneak peek at Nisio Isin's latest work based on CLAMP's *xxxHOLIC*, which Del Rey will be publishing later this year.



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WHAT CONSTITUTES AN ANIME GAME?

Sure, there are the obvious choices—anything with an actual anime license, for starters. But what about a JRPG with incredible anime-esque art? Or how about a fighter that's jam-packed with anime-inspired characters? And while we're at it, what about a long-running game franchise that was later turned into an anime? All the above—and more—are what we love to play. But don't just take our word for it. We asked the editors of **PlayStation: The Official Magazine** to share with us their favorite anime picks from the past few months. Following are nine games that you're bound to enjoy almost as much as anime itself!



DISGAEA 3

Loveable, penguin-like flunkies called Prinnyes, who pepper their speech with "Dood" and explode on impact? We're sold!



62

PERSONA 3 FES

More Personas, a weapon-fusion system, and a new difficulty setting round out this expansion to the quirky RPG.



64

ARCANA HEART

Eleven fetishy female fighters—including a thong-sporting cyborg. Which gal is right for you? Take your pick!



65

MANA KHEMIA

Forget those new-fangled RPGs. Turn-based combat is still alive and well in this story-driven, sprite-fueled charmer.



65

WILD ARMS XF

They say the West was won one hex at a time. You can do your part in securing victory by playing this strategy RPG.



66

NARUTO

ULTIMATE NINJA 3

Call it truth in advertising: This game's promise of ultimate-ness is delivered with a knockout kick.



67

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

Dante's back in action. And so is Nero. Wait... Nero? Yep. And he's got his Devil Bringer with him, so shut your mouth.



68

DRAGON BALL Z

BURST LIMIT

Scream loudly and save the world again, in a game that truly looks like an interactive anime.



70

NARUTO

ULTIMATE NINJA STORM

More Naruto action, this time on your PS3. Do you have what it takes to pass the Chunin finals?



71



Sapphire, a princess from the human world—proof positive that not every Nippon Ichi character is a complete psychopath (or an exploding pseudo-penguin).

DISGAEA 3

Midnight on the campus of good and evil, dood!

If Frowningly-Serious, Generic High-Fantasy RPGs™ can be seen as a sort of viral-tumor blight on videogaming, you can think of Nippon Ichi Software's *Disgaea* series as an intercontinental delivery system with a MIRVed payload of Interferon...with "HAVE A NICE DAY" spray-painted on each warhead. *Disgaea 3* is one of those warheads.

If you're new to the series, *Disgaea* games are turn-based strategy RPGs—heavily anime-flavored, self-aware, humorous, and peppered with all kinds of little oddball quirks (its most recent PSP outing, *Afternoon of Darkness*, features an alternate mode that assumes the protagonist is accidentally killed during the opening sequence, thus turning over the entire narrative to a hitherto supporting character).

Disgaea 3 continues in the wacky boot steps of its predecessors—but don't let the big-eyed anime stylings and jokes mislead you: This hardcore, battlefield-altering strategy game is out to kick your butt.

This time around, our attentions focus on Evil Academy—an Underworld institute of, um, lower learning for down-and-coming demon students of all persuasions and curricula. All things

scholastic work a little differently, here. "Honor Students"—like our young demon-protagonist, Mao—are the ones who never go to their classes, and avoid extracurricular entanglements like the plague; "delinquent" screw-ups, on the other hand—like our cute little demon-winged Miss Raspberyl, "Beryl" to you—ruin their academic reputations by doing reprehensible things like actually showing up for class, performing good deeds, and trying to persuade misguided psychos like Mao to not try and off their demon-Overlord fathers (in power-mad notions they got from reading too many *manga*, as is the case with this particular game). Hell-arity ensues.

The *Disgaea* universe has always had its own distinctive, unapologetically goofy style—anime-minded and oddball, even by Japanese standards. Populated by its resident student body of cartoonish, humanoid demons and various kooky creatures, the labyrinthine sprawl of the Evil Academy has the look and feel of a Gutenberg-era European castle-town, inexplicably overrun with cosplayers—not so much East-meets-West as

Hogwarts-meets-Harajuku.

One can hardly omit mentioning the loveable, penguin-like flunkies called Prinnyes, who pepper their speech with the word "dood"—in English, at least—and explode on impact when used as last-ditch projectile weapons. It's enough to send an oh-so-serious emo *Final Fantasy* type reeling from the room, bleeding from the eyes and ears. So *gambatte* there, Nippon Ichi.

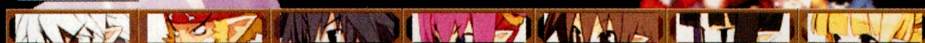
Disgaea 3 will maintain a ratio of turn-based battle gameplay to Academy preparation/story-telling elements comparable to previous *Disgaea* titles—about 80/20 (shifting to about 95/5 once you've beaten the main game, and moved on to try the various extra stages).

Deep, turn-based battles are the mechanical heart of the *Disgaea* series, and there are a number of improvements in the works. First off, the battlefields are larger; not only is there more physical space, but the battlegrounds are true three-dimensional multi-level affairs with treasures, boxes, and destructible terrain in the form of Geo Blocks. Geo Blocks are the three-dimensional extension of the previous games' Geo Panels: In *Disgaea 2*, you needed to be aware of Geo Panels and Geo Symbols—differently-colored battlefield squares and nodes that could profoundly affect the outcome of a battle when used in various explosive combinations.



The North American version features optional Japanese audio—you too can learn to talk like a nihongo-speaking netherworld delinquent!

ATTACK ENTRY



If these competitive-student types were any more cliquey, quirky or dysfunctional, there'd have to be a musical number in here somewhere. Oh, wait...



Yet another classic, magnificently-ridiculous team/combo attack, Disgaea-style.

Now, imagine the same sort of sympathetic-detonation scheme, but stacked in three-dimensional cubes. Blow out the purple block at the base of a stack, causing the red block above it to fall next to another red block, immediately annihilating both. The yellow block that was on top of that falls, takes damage, and explodes. Needless to say, the one poor enemy schmuck who was unlucky enough to be standing on top of all this now-collapsing, constantly-exploding crap to begin with—well, he is *screwed*. And this might be your first move of the battle!

And, hey, if the original battlefield configuration isn't quite set up for such a chain-reaction at the outset, you can always pick up some Geo Blocks and throw them somewhere else just to get the domino-effect thing rolling. If you can't be part of the solution, why not exacerbate the problem?

Speaking of throwing, previous games allowed you to pick up party-members and toss them to gain a little ground in battle. Now, you can chain said throws from member to member, hefting allies up to higher battlefield-platforms, or even volleyballing them from one character to another. Even the more brain-dead monsters in your party can continue to hurl your new breed of forward-juggled fighters (as long as said monsters are facing in the proper direction to facilitate the hand-off). It adds a lot of reach to the less-mobile

members of your strike force, and can really catch your enemies with their pants down, if done right.

Evil Academy itself functions like the Overlord's castle in *Disgaea*—i.e., as a hub/HQ where you can power up items, heal party members, create new units, check game status, and try to bribe/muscle/booze the Student Council into granting various requests between battles (everything from "summon characters from previous games" to "make a new story chapter for me.") In addition to *Disgaea 2*'s blistering

Item World, there will also be a Class World (which does the same random-field, stat-boosting thing for characters).

As if all that weren't enough, *Disgaea 3* will also offer puzzle-style Dark Stages, optional Japanese dialogue/audio, and downloadable characters, items, and even complete story chapters via PlayStation Network, shortly after release. If you've never experienced the weirdness that is *Disgaea*, now would be a perfect time to get on board—watch your step, and mind the exploding Prinnyes, dood. ■



Senior-class demon chicks with tennis rackets and spiked bats, ready to teach school—kinda gives the phrase "hazing from Hell" a whole new meaning.



Support your local student body—no, REALLY.

PERSONA 3 FES

Multiple Persona-lities

Considering the direction Japanese RPGs have taken over the past few years, finding one that doesn't require a Ph.D. to comprehend from a gameplay standpoint is a rare occurrence indeed. Getting that game courtesy of Atlus is even more surprising.

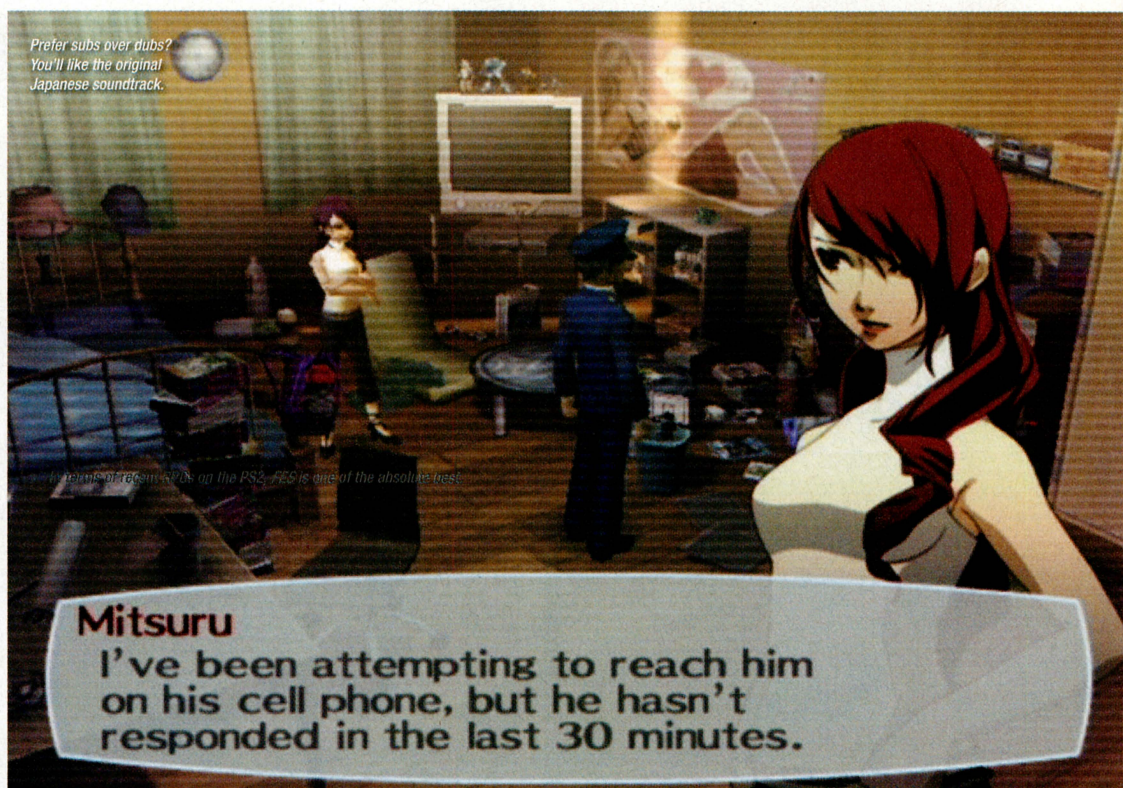
But that's exactly what happened last year with the release of *Persona 3*. Atlus' dark, yet charming RPG struck all the right chords and boasted incredible depth without the murky and confusing gameplay systems and miles-deep menus that clog so many other JRPGs. Unearthing new Personas to utilize during battle—and fusing them to create new powers—was fun and intuitive.

Even so, *Persona 3* was, for all intents and purposes, a dungeon crawl. The main goal was to traverse one randomly generated level after another, fighting legions of enemies and the odd boss character. But formulaic gameplay was made much more attractive by the dual roles played by its characters. Demon-slayers by night, our heroes were mostly high school students by day. And going to school each day (not to mention hanging out at the mall, praying at the shrine, and so forth) helped break up the action. Socializing with fellow students results in stronger Personas which pays monster hunting dividends.

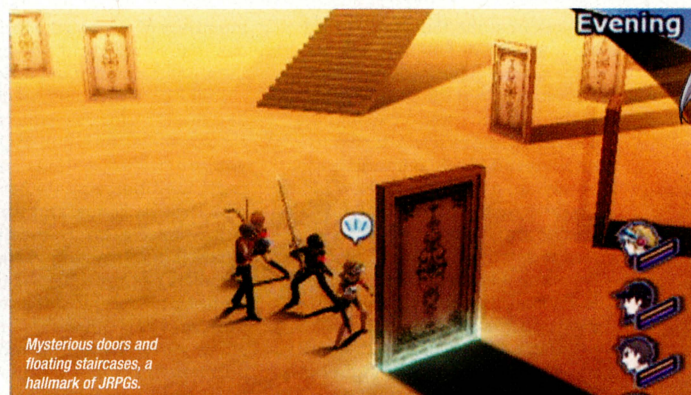
This year, Atlus has enhanced its RPG success with an expansion pack of sorts—*Persona 3 FES* comes with a complete version of the original title, updated with more Personas, a weapon-fusion system, and a new difficulty setting. More importantly, *FES* comes with an all-new game chapter—one that continues the storyline of the original game. This bonus 30-hour outing reveals the real ending to *Persona 3*.

The beauty is that you don't need to play through the whole game again (unless you want to; it is included, after all), or even transfer your old save file. You have access to this new chapter right from the title screen.

Be warned. Though the new chapter is very good, it's also combat heavy and sports a moderately high difficulty level. Gone is the socialization between dungeon crawls, and the game suffers a bit for it. But if you take the new chapter for what it is—an expansion pack—then you won't be disappointed. At \$30, the hit to your wallet is exceedingly easy to take, whether you're a *Persona* rookie or veteran. ■



Three cheers for toothy, googly-eyed, multi-armed Personas!





PS2 | PRICE: \$29.99 | ESRB: Teen | PUBLISHER: Atlus | DEVELOPER: Ecole

ARCANA HEART

Hot girl-on-girl-on-giant-blob action

If you're the type who already knows what this is, go ahead and buy it—odds are you'll love it. For everyone else, your enjoyment of *Arcana Heart* will come down to how much you like watching 11 fetishy anime girls—including a sword-wielding maid and a thong-sporting android—beat the syrupy-cute crap out of each other. There's some depth underneath the pretty exterior, thanks to 11 companion "elementals" that grant your fighter additional special moves and abilities, but in the main this is old school, button-mashing 2D silliness. Add in flashy combos and screen-filling super-attacks, and *Arcana* makes for an enjoyable, if guilty, pleasure. ■



Instead of leveling up, your characters progress by unlocking skills in Grow Books, FFX-style.

Each character has special abilities. Pamela, for example, can consume her own health to summon help.



Mana Khemia: ALCHEMISTS OF AL-REVIS

Turn-based combat is still alive

Becoming an alchemist isn't merely tossing herbs into a cauldron. As the students of *Mana Khemia's* Al-Revis Academy discover, it's also about honing battle skills, making friends, and overcoming personal demons (like a penchant for causing explosions...a potentially deadly habit for an aspiring alchemist). A charming mix of school sim and turn-based RPG, the gameplay consists of guiding the orphan Vayne Aurelius through his three years at school and is delivered with NIS's signature darling sprite graphics and perky music. The combination

of the light-hearted story, crafting-driven gameplay, and turn-based combat creates an experience that's familiar, fun, and addictive.

As a sort-of successor to the *Atelier Iris* series (the alchemy is the same, but the school setting is new), *Mana Khemia* revolves around crafting better and better items, and that's one of the game's most charming aspects. You run, jump, and slash your way through monster-packed terrain to gather raw materials. Then, you bring those ingredients back to your workshop, play a reflex-based mini-game to imbue them with status effects (like

elemental spells or stat boosts), and craft them into more useful items like steel or cloth. Afterwards, you combine those items into armor and weapons. The attributes of your gear depend on the effects you earned during the mini-games, allowing for a vast array and diversity in customization. You can, for example, arm your damage-dealing characters with a sword that gives an "attack up" boost or adorn your magic-wielders with a dress that bestows healing spells. We loved the mechanic so much that we spent hours just re-synthesizing items to optimize our gear.

Pink teddy bears with giant, razor-sharp claws? Yep, just another typical battle for your friendly neighborhood alchemist!

The battle system is turn and party-based, with a Burst meter that enables powerful effects when maxed. Yes, it feels dated, but traditional RPG fans (like us) won't have a problem with the slower pace. The story and characters feel like they fell straight out of an anime, so they're a little cliché, but when we turn on the Japanese dubs, we still can't resist them. *Mana Khemia* is hardly innovative, but if you're a fan of classic Japanese-style RPGs, you don't want to miss it. ■

Clarissa's Dandelion Shot allows her to attack in a straight line in any direction.



WILD ARMS XF

The west was won a single hex at a time

Most strategy RPGs sport a wicked learning curve. Like in chess, considerable effort is needed to master the nuances of a complex turn-based battle system with multiple characters squaring off on diverse terrain. In the case of *Wild Arms XF*, that curve is more like a cliff—and if you're not ready for it, it'll knock you flat onto your keister.

Which is exactly what happened to me a few hours in. It started out as a pleasant return to Filgaia, complete with the series' trademark mash-up of anime-inspired Wild West motifs and steampunk trappings. I've always enjoyed the *Wild Arms*-series, despite its constant flirtation with mediocrity; its first foray into the SRPG genre was shaping up to be a likable diversion.

That is, until my ragtag team had to bust out a group of innocent townies held captive. Springing them from jail proved easy enough: Just sneak around and avoid being sighted by guards. (Which, by the way, was a nifty use of the battle

grid; it was the first time I recall playing a stealth-only mission in an SRPG, and it proved to be just one of many unique mission objectives.) But the ensuing escort mission to safety? I had to replay it at least half a dozen times, literally hurling my PSP to the floor in abject frustration (thank goodness for plush carpeting!) before investing a couple more hours to leveling up and experimenting with the class system. After another few attempts, I finally beat the battle with a pair of Gadgeteers handling the healing process, along with a Halberdier to tackle the rear guard with the help of Tony (no class change for him—he's a dog, after all). As for my Martial Mage, I moved him from the head of the pack into the middle of the scrum to tackle that dastardly prison warden.

Not an RPG guy? Then allow me to break it down: In the process of defeating this level, I discovered a deep combat system that requires a constant shuffling of classes. Unlike most SRPGs, you can't simply rush in with your favorite leveled-up fighters and hope for the best. You literally have to pick and choose character classes before every major battle and then re-equip your sub-skills, equipment, and items. It can be a bit tedious—the constant fiddling with menus and the inability to create an army of uber-powerful specialists is a drag at times—but if you're a fan of the "S" in SRPGs, then *XF* comes recommended. ■

◎ Make sure you have characters with high CLM stats when you enter multi-level battlefields.



Forget wizards and warriors. *Wild Arms XF* includes a range of original character classes, including the speedy Nightstalker.



Watch where you are! The hexagonal grid opens up the field to a range of strategic attack options.



Some items and spells affect everyone in the target area—friend or foe.





Manga-style kanji sound effects bring battles to life.

Naruto: ULTIMATE NINJA 3

How much more ultimate can an ultimate ninja get?!

It was inevitable that *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja 3* would come stateside, what with it selling like Kakashi cakes (which are Kakashi Hatake-shaped pancakes, of course!) in Japan since 2005. Still, we were as skeptical as anyone about how much more ultimate another ninja-style fighting game could be after two already stellar releases in the franchise. After some serious hours pounding out jutsu, we conclude that *Ultimate Ninja 3* doesn't revolutionize the fighting genre, but it does take the series a step forward, retaining all our favorite *Naruto* flavors (like Vs. Duel and power-shopping at the Tazukuri Market) while adding a couple of welcome twists including the RPG-flavored "Ultimate Conquest" (a revamped version of "Ultimate Road" from *UN2*) and some sweet mini-games.

With 20 stages, an extensive array of characters (almost 70!), and combo-based combat, *Ultimate Ninja 3* features brawling akin to the *Super Smash Bros.* series, except that it's all based on the *Naruto* anime. Fans of the *Ultimate Ninja* series will be happy to know the combo-tastic controls work exactly as remembered: you're still "Charge Kicking" your way to victory using a variety of hurt-in-

flicting combos. It's still incredibly satisfying to throw, dash, wall-run, and even walk on water as you kick the snot out of your opponents with big-time combo attacks and counters. The button-pressing contests are back to decide the winner of jutsu collisions, and you still wield a variety of items including throwing stars.

For those of you with wanderlust, the Ultimate Road mode has been re-imagined as "Ultimate Contest," featuring the same RPG-based quasi-open-world feel (though this time the territory is larger and you can access rooftops and such). The introduction of a handy on-screen radar removes the need to swap back and forth between the action and the map.

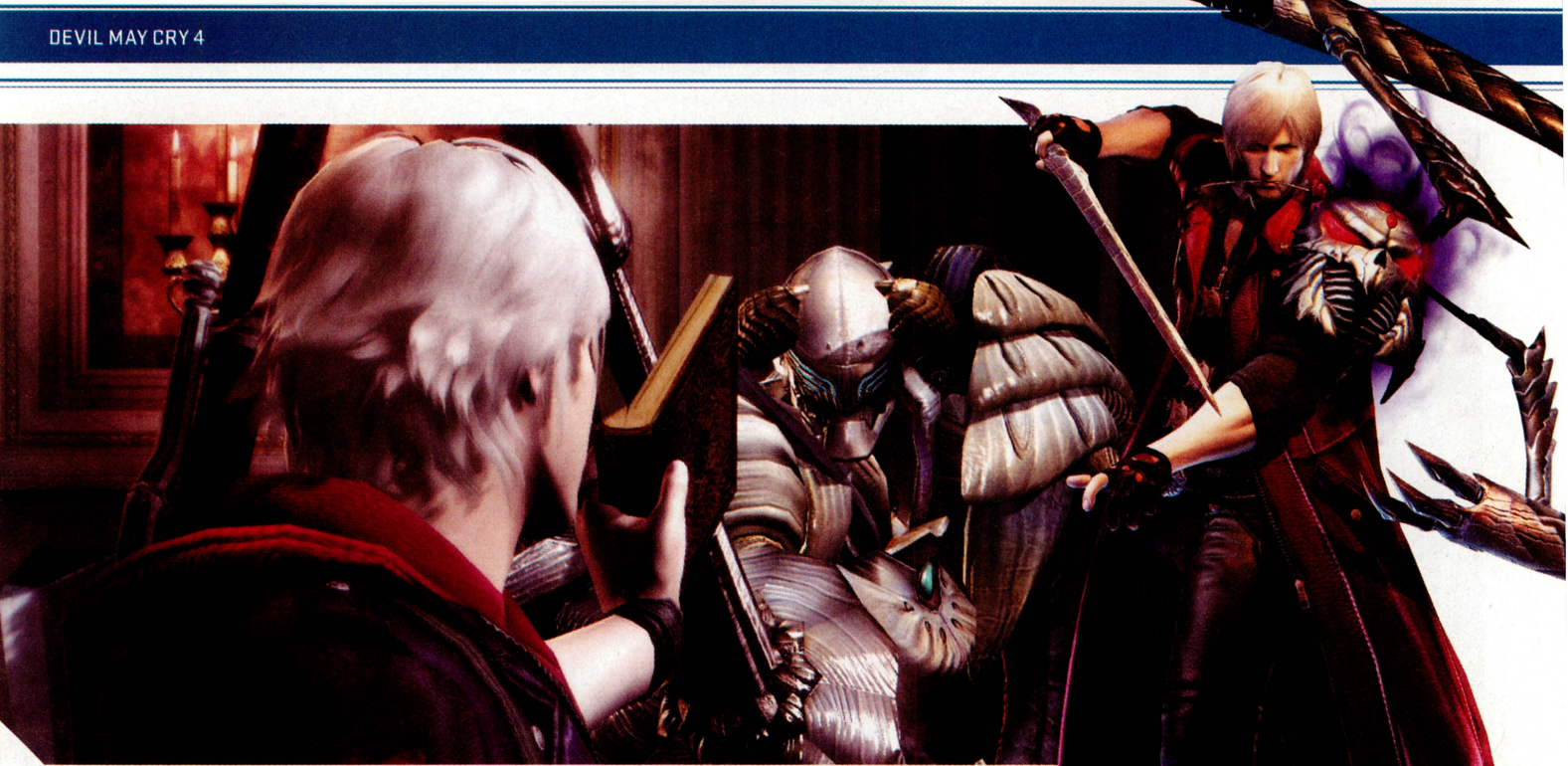
Other modes include a handful of fun, albeit brief, mini-games; a sparring mode called "Iruka's Training," Capture and Shuriken modes (capture Pakkun, an unhappy-looking canine, and hit airborne junk to unlock items, respectively), and even a retrospective called "Hero's History," which lets you play through the *Naruto* anime storyline from the Genin Training to the Sasuke Retrieval story arcs. All in all, *UN3* seems fairly ultimate by most ninja standards, at least until number four comes out. ■

CEL-INNOVATING

Naruto isn't the first game to digitally perfect the cel-shaded cartoon look. That distinction belongs to *Jet Grind Radio* (Sega, 2000), the quirky in-line skating, graffiti-tagging tour de force on the Sega Dreamcast



No longer hidden in the shadows, ninjas have become a colorful lot.



The story is told in intensely action-packed cutscenes. No, books don't block attacks.

DEVILMAY CRY 4

Dante's back and ready to unleash hell

It's been nearly three years since the last *Devil May Cry*, and in that time the series' star power has faded. What once was the undisputed king of PlayStation action has been supplanted by upstarts like *God of War*, which built on *DMC*'s extreme brand of hack-and-slash carnage with prettier visuals and more visceral gameplay. But now the series that reinvented 3D action games is back—and it's pissed.

You want pretty? *Devil May Cry 4* brings it, with beautifully animated characters, lavish backdrops, and superb production values. Brutal? *DMC4* not only lets you shoot and slash your way through foes, but enables you to beat them to death with a giant spectral fist, or unleash hell with a suitcase that transforms into several varieties of stupidly

huge rocket launcher. And while it's difficult to tell from static screens, it packs enough silly charm to outclass Kratos' brooding and scowling any day of the week.

If you've been paying any attention to the game up until now, you'll know that series star Dante takes a back seat for most of *DMC4*, giving up the spotlight to Nero, his wet-behind-the-ears look-alike. Nero's a member of the Order of the Sword, a cult that worships Dante's father as a god. When we're first introduced to him, he's running late for a sermon. It's just as well, though, because all he would have missed—apart from a hymn sung beautifully by his girlfriend Kyrie—was Dante smashing through the roof of the Order's chapel and shooting its high priest in the head.

Say what you will about Nero, the boy can bust out some impressive aerial combos.

Hunting Dante

The reasons for Dante's crime will be revealed soon enough, but in the meantime, Nero's tasked with hunting him down—starting with a duel that highlights the differences between the two heroes. At first blush, they're nearly identical, using similar moves and weapons, but Nero's got a few tricks up his sleeve that set him apart. The biggest is the Devil Bringer, an upgradeable demon arm that can be used, *Bionic Commando*-style, to pull Nero along glowing blue grapple points, or yank enemies toward him (or yank him over to them, if they're bigger). It also enables you to unleash close-range attacks that have contextual effects dependent on the demon type you're fighting—some might simply be smashed against the ground a few times, while others get ripped apart, stabbed with their own weapons, or even abused as deadly projectiles.

Bells and whistles aside, though, the action is vintage *Devil May Cry*, right down to the irksome sequences where magical barriers trap you in a room, and you have to kill off waves of enemies to proceed. Thankfully, these never really get boring or frustrating—they're short, the combat is loads of slashy-shooty fun, and the difficulty is nowhere near as crushing as it was in *DMC3*. In fact, beyond

setting the difficulty level, you'll be able to choose different levels of hand-holding from the game, like an automatic combo system that makes complicated attacks a lot easier (but less fun) to pull off, or an automatic level-up path for those who don't want to bother with choosing abilities to upgrade.

In a lot of ways, Nero is actually much more fun to play than Dante; he's a little quicker and more agile, and his Devil Bringer—along with the inventive item-based puzzles he needs to solve—make the game's city, castles, snowy cliffs, and jungle a blast to explore. And you'll have plenty of leeway to explore them; the game is divided into 20 "missions," but the game-world itself is one long, snaking path that you can backtrack through if you feel the need. In fact, you will feel the need, because once you reach the end of it (which happens about 60 percent of the way through) Dante takes over and you'll have to work your way back to the game's beginning, fighting the same bosses along the



These guys are slippery, but if you can yank off their cloaks, they'll be helpless against your attacks.



way because Nero didn't kill them off the first time through.

Luckily, that's nowhere near as lame as it sounds, and it never really feels like backtracking. Dante's path is reshuffled a little, the monsters he encounters are

different, and his skill set is drastically different from Nero's. Without the Devil Bringer or magical items to help you along, you'll have to find new solutions to puzzles (most of them of the "administering beatdowns" variety).

Return of Dante

Even better, you'll be able to play with a bunch of toys and abilities as Dante that were strictly off limits to Nero. The upgradeable "fighting styles" from *DMC3* are back (although they really just impart new special moves and don't change Dante's basic attacks), and you'll now be able to switch between them on the fly. You'll also have access to six weapons, the most impressive three being Gilgamesh, a suit of armor that gives Dante crazy martial-arts abilities; Lucifer, which enables him to toss out glowing red spikes that stay stuck in enemies and can be exploded at will; and Pandora, a transforming gun that lets you unleash rockets, missiles, heavy machine-gun fire, and even lasers, provided you know what you're doing.

Our only real complaints are with the game's presentation; it's actually a little too pretty, and looks plastic and brittle next to *God of War*'s gritty monster-stomping or *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*'s spurning gore. It's also packed to the gills with lengthy, real-time cutscenes, which,

true to the series' form, are filled with awesomely over-the-top action sequences. Nothing wrong with that, except that we don't just want to watch this stuff anymore; we want to play it. As much as we hate to say it, *God of War*-style button-mashing sequences might actually have helped a lot here; just look what they did for *Resident Evil 4*.

Overall, though, *Devil May Cry 4* is a pretty sweet package, offering up a slew of secret challenges and "Accomplishments" to complement its compelling plot and fierce action. If you're one of the many who's been eagerly waiting for Dante and his pals to make a comeback, you won't be disappointed. ■



Power Up

After each mission, your performance nets you a certain number of Brave Souls to trade for skill upgrades—but you likely won't be able to buy them all on the first play-through, so be choosy. Hack-and-slashers should go straight for new sword combos and charged-up pistol shots, but more nimble players will want to extend the Devil Bringer's reach or buy cool moves like the attack-sidestepping Table Hopper.

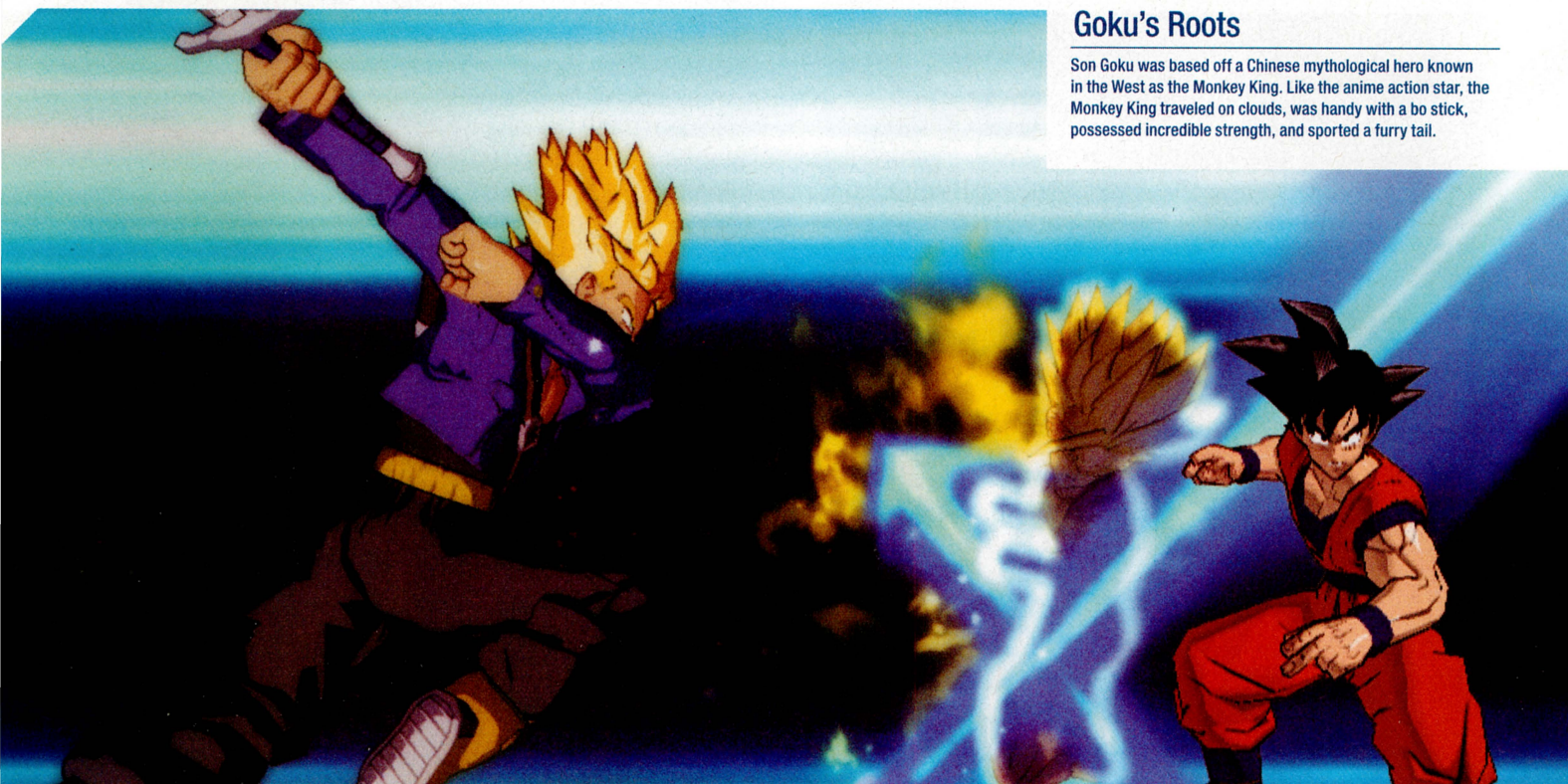
Don't worry about saving for the transition to Dante—you'll get all your Brave Souls refunded (while still keeping Nero's upgrades), ready to spend on new fighting-style moves or weapon upgrades.

The best part? Your new powers stay with you through subsequent play-throughs on higher difficulty levels. Awesome.



Goku's Roots

Son Goku was based off a Chinese mythological hero known in the West as the Monkey King. Like the anime action star, the Monkey King traveled on clouds, was handy with a bo stick, possessed incredible strength, and sported a furry tail.



Dragon Ball Z: BURST LIMIT

Scream loudly and save the world...again

Whether it's a flurry using Piccolo's Gumbi-like arms, unleashing Goku's patented Kamehameha, or just plain walking forward, every character movement in *Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit* looks like it's been ripped straight from the anime series. Too bad its beauty is skin deep. When you get right down to it, *Burst Limit* is a somewhat shallow fighter that primarily delivers a fistful of fan service for admirers of the series' trademark characters.

Watching Goku and company dash about as they smash each other silly looks epic, but because of all the fast-paced action, you never actually feel like you're in control of the action, making each round more like a game of chance than skill.

Combos can be strung together with flurries of weak and strong attacks that'll send your opponent flying, but a well-timed push on the guard button or a quick sidestep can counter just about every move. Because of this, battles often devolve into a frenzy of random button-mashing, switching over to the guard button whenever you see your enemy making a move.

But for DBZ fans, the game still has a lot to offer: *Burst Limit's* Story mode makes up for its simple

combat. All the major battles from Vegeta's first trip to Earth, Frieza's assault on Namek, and the Cell Games are present and accounted for. The joy of helping Goku give Vegeta a much-needed beatdown and stepping into the shoes of Cell to crush the friendly and philosophical Android 17 is hard to resist. (If you've got any idea what we're talking about, then this game is most definitely for you.)

As you make your way through the Story mode, you'll also unlock new characters and battles. But unless you're familiar with the DBZ canon, the barrage of memorable battles between major characters (like Cell and Gohan) and minor ones (like Yamcha and the Saibamen) won't mean all that much. In fact, they might even confuse you, as the brief cutscenes don't do anything except establish that two guys are about to fight. That said, the Story mode is the most enjoyable part of the game, so we were left wanting more after we finished those battles and unlocked most of the characters in less than six hours.

Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit's gorgeous graphics really do mimic the anime. But once your eyes adjust to the razzle-dazzle, you find that the gameplay isn't as pretty. Still, it's a no-brainer for DBZ fans. ■



Trunks and Gohan tussle to determine who's got the spikiest hair.

Repeatedly tap X to counter the hard-to-read attacks of smaller guys like Gohan.



Delicious Names

Did you know that a lot of *Dragon Ball Z's* characters are named after types of food? Yamcha is a type of tea, Gohan means rice, and Vegeta is a derivative of vegetable, just to name a few.



Prefer subs over dubs? You'll like the original Japanese soundtrack.



Beautifully drawn character models and smoothly animated movement help *NUNS* look less like a game and more like an anime.



Rock Lee deserves a swift kick to the head for that awful haircut!

Naruto: **ULTIMATE NINJA STORM**

A fever of orange jumpsuits, metallic headbands, and chakra. No, it's not the '70s, it's *Naruto*!

The barrier dividing anime and game has been shattered. According to our in-person interview with Hiroshi Matsuyama, the President of CyberConnect2, *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm* won't be the same fighting game we've already played half a dozen times. Though the familiar Battle mode will be included, the focus of *NUNS* is on a Mission mode that lets you play through episodes one through 135 of the *Naruto* anime. You'll experience first hand all the major events, from the first Chunin exam to the Chunin finals, and you'll earn skills and meet new characters (Rock Lee, Gaara) the same way *Naruto* did in the anime. Best of all, thanks to graphical prowess of the PS3, the visual differentiation between anime and game will have been removed, a fact that makes the amiable Matsuyama beam with excitement.

So, *Naruto* fans, take off those Konoha Forehead Protectors and put away those ninja wristbands, because with *NUNS*, you can now finally *become* *Naruto*. Ittai!

Cheekiness aside, the game looks impressive. CyberConnect2 decided to sacrifice multiplayer (the only group play is offline one-on-one versus) for a real-time camera that follows characters as they traverse destructible, three-dimensional environments. Combat has been tweaked, and each of the 25 playable characters will have a powerful, graphically impressive special move (which you'll later be able to customize). You can also choose two support characters before you battle. When summoned, they'll perform a single move, and you'll have to wait a while before you can use them again. Boss battles, a variety of mission objectives, and *God of War*-style timed button-pressing sequences round out the combat in *NUNS*, though these last features will only be found in the Mission mode.

So if you're a *Naruto* fan, you'd better start brushing up on the anime's early combat moves. You'll need to know them, as this looks to be the series' most ambitious fighting title yet. ■



Think your school was tough? Imagine having to take a knee to the groin in order to pass your final exams!

TALK LIKE AN OTAKU

Sometimes it seems like anime fans speak a language all their own. It's not exactly English, but it's far from Japanese. For the uninitiated, here's a glossary detailing several oft-heard bits of otaku-speak—which might be helpful if you still don't know what "otaku" means in the first place.

Akiba: Short for "Akihabara," a shopping district in Tokyo where otaku gather to buy electronics, DVDs, CDs, game software, and an infinite variety of creepy cartoon fetish pornography (often in the form of *dojinshi*). American otaku view Akiba as something akin to a mythical land of milk and honey, providing they have never actually been there.

Bishonen: Japanese for "beautiful boy," a slender male cartoon figure with characteristics ranging from mildly girly to really, really girly. Female otaku typically can't get enough bishonen, and often subject them to starring roles in *yaoi*.

Con: Short for "convention," a con is an event where otaku gather to watch anime, talk about their favorite anime, consume too much liquor (if they're old enough) or sugar (if they're not), and frighten passers-by with all manner of outlandish *cosplay*.

Cosplay: A contraction of "costume play," cosplay involves dressing up as your favorite anime character and "playing" that role in public. Conceived in Japan back in the '80s, cosplay has become the focal point of American cons, where thousands of otaku show up in elaborate costumes and put on hours of interminable stage skits.

Dojinshi: Dojinshi are amateur-published comics, usually created by Japanese otaku, and in turn usually featuring those otaku's favorite anime and videogame characters. They are often disturbingly pornographic in content, particularly in the case of *yaoi*.

Kawaii: Japanese for "cute." Cuteness is inescapable in anime and manga, to the point where all but the most dedicated otaku are likely to find more extreme examples stomach-turningly saccharine.

>>**Lolita:** "Lolita" can mean many things in otaku circles, from a Japanese subculture revolving around ornate, ultra-feminine fashions to a genre of adult material catering to guys with a fetish for underage girls. One thing it almost never refers to, however, is the classic Vladimir Nabokov novel, which most otaku have probably never read.

Mecha: Originally a Japanese slang term for any sort of technology, mecha now specifically refers to the big robots that have starred in anime for many years. Mecha can be practically human-sized (like the powered suits of *Appleseed*), but the biggest dwarf the tallest skyscrapers (as in *Gunbuster*).

Moe: Not the bowl-hairdo'd brains of the Three Stooges, but rather a Japanese word pronounced "moh-ay." Moe is difficult to define, but loosely speaking it's descriptive of something an otaku obsesses over—usually *kawaii* young female cartoon characters.

Otaku: In Japan, an otaku can be someone obsessed with any number of different weird hobbies. In America, an otaku is usually someone specifically crazy for anime and manga. In both nations, an otaku is not usually someone you'd want to see your daughter bring home to dinner.

Tokusatsu: Japanese for "special effects." When otaku aren't watching cartoons, they often binge on "toku" instead, the genre of live-action chop-socky TV shows that includes the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Masked Rider*.

Tsundere: A Japanese term that describes a type of anime character, the girl with a harsh exterior that conceals a soft and sensitive heart. Tsundere characters are common in anime aimed at young, lonely male otaku, fueling as they do the fantasy that those viewers might find an understanding mate in the real world.

Yaoi: A popular pastime among female otaku, yaoi is a genre of "slash fiction" *dojinshi* that shoe-horns male anime characters into unlikely intimate partnerships.



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